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WONDER STORY ANNUAL

1953 EDITION 25c

FEATURING
GATEWAY TO PARADISE
By JACK WILLIAMSON

RAY BRADBURY
ROBERT A. HEINLEIN
HENRY KUTTNER
ISAAC ASIMOV
AND OTHERS



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WONDER STORY ANNUAL

VOL. 2, NO. 1

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

1953 EDITION

A COMPLETE NOVEL

GATEWAY TO PARADISE . JACK WILLIAMSON 10

Barry Shane had to impersonate his own enemy when the Earth was strangely split into two worlds by a barrier of hatred!

TWO NOVELETS

CALL HIM DEMON HENRY KUTTNER 96

Deep in his four-dimensional lair, crouches that hungry monster—while only children guard its puzzled adult victims

JERRY IS A MAN ROBERT A. HEINLEIN 132

At first she wanted an interesting household pet—but then she got another idea when she made her decision about Jerry

SHORT STORIES

CHRISTMAS ON GANYMEDE ISAAC ASIMOV 85

Playing Santa Claus at Yuletide is no cinch on this planet!

FIND THE SCULPTOR SAMUEL MINES 113

They found the future, but lost the men who had created it

NOTHING SIRIUS FREDRIC BROWN 121

They could have a planet to themselves, but who wanted it?

THE IRRITATED PEOPLE RAY BRADBURY 150

Every war weapon was outlawed—with the exception of vanity

FEATURES

WHO'S WHO IN 1953 W. S. A. THE EDITOR 6

FLYING SAUCERS (Verse) ALLEN GLASSER 9

SAMUEL MINES, Editor

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WHO'S WHO IN 1953 W. S. A.



WITH one exception,* this issue of WONDER STORY ANNUAL is noticeably a gallery of great names in science fiction. This was done deliberately, but not for the glitter of great names in themselves; rather for the logical reason that these are great names because they wrote great stories.

JACK WILLIAMSON—one of the earliest artisans in the field, is still hard at work. He has kept pace with the new maturity of science fiction; and it is gratifying to see that his name is as familiar to new readers as to those of a generation ago.

HENRY KUTTNER is the writer most other writers mention with respect. He has probably taught more of them how to write than he himself realizes. A brilliant word artist, Kuttner is a master of moods, able to write fantasy as brilliant as a polished diamond, rowdy humor, penetrating psychological studies, coldly cerebral tales at will. The story chosen for this issue is mood with overtones of chill, and often mentioned as one of his finest stories.

Everyone knows **ROBERT A. HEINLEIN** for his detailed, three dimensional studies of men and machines and the industrial empires which spring from them. We have brought you a little known Heinlein which is warm, human, alive with laughter and amazingly shrewd in its insight. We have read a lot of Heinlein; we are inclined to think this is his best story in lengths under novel size.

Most people know **ISAAC ASIMOV** as a serious and sober writer, a student of men and civilizations. You'll find an unexpected side of him here—a droll and delightful side. *This Asimov has recently been resurrected and his new work has begun again to reflect the wonderful humor so abundantly promised in the earlier story included here.

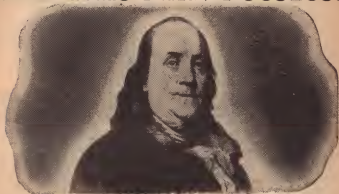
The **RAY BRADBURY** story is another neglected work which we have always considered one of his best short stories. That anthologists have overlooked it is their loss, and in this case, your good fortune. It catches Bradbury at the very peak of his prowess, when the unique quality of his word pictures made entranced readers fling the word "genius" about most recklessly.

And not least is **FREDERIC BROWN**, a stylist an expert that other writers and editors are ungrudging in their admiration. The story selected here is one of a group written for the **THRILLING** magazines several years ago which were likely a bit ahead of their time, for they are as modern and up-to-date now, in spite of the changes in science fiction, as ever.

A lot of careful planning went into these choices. The stories are stories with content, but in spite of that, are chosen for you to enjoy. If you do that, we'll be happy.

—*Samuel Mines, Editor

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(A Rosicrucian)

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FLYING SAUCERS

By ALLEN GLASSER

From deepest Space the disks appear,
Like visitants from There to Here,
Yet no man knows from what strange world,
In realms remote, these disks were hurled,
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Galactic friend or enemy?


Supposing, then, these Saucers came
As viewers of the deadly game
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Enclosed within, the Watchers wait
Release when Man has met his fate—
Successors, they, to Earth's estate!

Gateway



to Paradise

a novel by JACK WILLIAMSON



*Barry Shane had to impersonate his own
enemy when Earth was split
into two worlds by a barrier of hate!*

I

Wall Around America

BARRY SHANE first saw the Ring on the summer before he was nine. It was like a gigantic glass bowl turned upside-down over America.

Barry had come alone on the monorail to visit his grandfather. It was a thrilling thing to have

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his own compartment in the big teardrop that skimmed so fast and silently along the high, thin rail.

Grandfather Barry lived in a little blue plastoid cottage on the shore of California Corporation, not a mile from where the Ring cut in from the sea. He was a lean, spry, cheerful man, with a bright Ring Guard medal on his breast.

"Can I go to the Ring?" Barry demanded at once.

The invisible wall had fascinated the youngster from his first glimpse of it at the monorail station. Inside it, his grandfather's spotted cow was grazing in the green meadow. The sea below the cliffs was alive with dancing waves. But on the other side of the wall, the hills were brown and dead. Outside, there was no sea.

"Better keep inside the fence," warned the old man in a cracked, kindly voice. "There are things Outside a little boy shouldn't see. Besides, you'll get in trouble with the Guard."

"Why, Grampa?" Barry wanted to know.

"The Guard has to protect the Ring," the lean old Guardsman explained. "If anything happened to it, you see, all our air might explode into the vacuum Outside. That would kill everybody in America. Once a man named Brock was experimenting with a machine to cut a door in the vibration wall. Something went wrong. The hole must have been larger than he intended, because the air started rushing out in a terrible wind. Dr. Brock, along with several hundred other people, was swept Outside to die."

"Oh, Mother told me!" cried Barry. "You stopped Brock's machine. That's how you got your medal."

The old Guardsman smiled and nodded.

"I managed to crash my patrol plane into the machine. That stopped the interfering radiation and the hole in the Ring closed itself." He

sighed. "That was fifty years ago."

Barry's face glowed with eager determination.

"When I grow up," he declared, "I'm going to be a Guardsman."

"Your father will have something to say about that," Grandfather Barry's eyes looked sad. "He'll want you to be a director of Chicago Corporation and president of Uranatomic Central, like himself. I'd want to see you become a Guard, Barry. Maybe your mother would. But Patterson Shane will never let you give up his millions for anything so foolish as the Guard."

Barry puzzled over that statement. It didn't make sense to his young mind.

"Can anybody go Outside?" he asked. "Ever?"

"Brock wasn't the first to try, or the last. They've all been killed. The disasters they caused killed several thousand others, but they seem to keep trying, in spite of the Guard. Perhaps some day a safe way out will be found, a way that will cause no harm."

"I want to go Outside," Barry stated. "I'll find a way."

Next day, playing with his kite, he went toward the strange wall, for the forbidden mystery of it drew him like a magnet. Fifty yards within that great, invisible curve, the fields stopped. On a tall wire fence hung signs that read:

KEEP OUT
Order of the Ring Guard

BYOND the fence was a dusty road, still within the Ring. Waiting on the hill, he watched a silent electric patrol car come to the end of the road above the cliffs and turn back. When it was out of sight, he slipped under the fence and ran across the road.

Beyond the road was a strip of weeds. The weeds were ended by the Ring. He crouched in them, close to the barrier, staring at it.

The Ring was clearer than glass, absolutely invisible. There wasn't even a speck of dust on it. It felt harder and more slippery than any glass, and neither hot nor cold. It turned the point of his pocket-knife, though he could see that it had no thickness.

Horrible things lay close Outside. They were brown and dry and dead, sprawled on the bleached, dead grass. Packs and bundles lay beside them—cooking things and tattered blankets. He recognized the skeletons of men and women, babies and donkeys. One brown, mummied hand clutched a torn newspaper.

With his face pressed against that hard, invisible wall, Barry tried to spell out a headline. *La Stella Negra*. It must be Spanish. These people must have come up out of Mexico to seek the Ring's shelter, only they had been too late.

Suddenly he felt ill. He looked away toward the Pacific. Inside the Ring, blue water glistened in the sun. Far away he could see the white, tiny sails of fishing boats. But Outside, beyond the cliffs and the seaworn beach, were only a strange and terrible desert, dark, treeless hills and tawny plains of baked, dark-fissured sea mud.

The sky was queerly black Outside, because there was no air to make a proper sky. Every shadow was harsh and cold and solid. The dead lands slanted down and down forever into the dry, mysterious chasm where the vanished ocean once had flowed.

What was at the bottom of that forbidden pit? One day, Barry Shane promised himself, he would find out.

It startled him to discover his grandfather standing beyond the fence behind him. Grinning sheepishly, he got up out of the weeds and went back across the road. He looked anxiously into the old man's face.

"Are you angry with me, Gram-

pa?" he asked.

The seamed face looked almost stern.

"You didn't mean any harm, but the Guard has to keep people away from the Ring. The life of America depends on it." The old Guardsman smiled suddenly. "I was a boy once, so I know how you feel. But you better get back on this side of the fence before a patrol comes along."

Barry slipped under the fence and gratefully took the thin, gnarled hand.

"Tell me, Grampa, what was it like, really—I mean before there was a Ring? And what happened then? Mother and my teachers told me a little, but I never saw the Ring. It's hard to think how things could be so different."

As they stood there on the green hill, looking through the wonderful transparent wall that was their only shelter from the changeless death that held everything Outside, the veteran told him the Ring's amazing story.

"It happened nearly two-hundred years ago, back in nineteen forty-four. Before that there was air everywhere. The seas were filled with water and men could live on all the continents. Even America was different then. There was more wind and the tides rose many feet instead of inches. Sometimes there were great storms and in the winter cold waves came down from the polar regions. But there was more rain and the population was twice our sixty-eight millions.

"Victor Barry had invented the new science of ultra-electronics. In Nineteen forty-two he built his ultradyne-drive space ship. Vic Barry was my great-great-great-grandfather." The wrinkled face beamed proudly. "And you were named for him."

"Mother told me that," agreed Barry Shane.

Automatically the old Guards-

man's gnarled hands began to fill his battered pipe.

"With the astronomer Tyne, Vic Barry reached the Moon—"

IN A PUZZLED voice, the boy interrupted:

"Tell me about the Moon."

"That's another thing the Earth lost along with her atmosphere and her seas," the old man said. "The Moon was another, smaller world. It used to circle around the Earth, a quarter of a million miles away. Barry and Tyne found that it was mostly ice—which the Cosmic Ice Theory had already suggested—around just a core of rock. They set up a telescope on the Moon. The seeing was better there, because it had no air. Soon Tyne discovered the Dwarf—"

"What was the Dwarf, Grampa?"

"It was a small, heavy, dark world, a dead sun of the degenerate matter called neutronium. It was smaller than the Moon, but heavier than Jupiter. The two men got safely back with their warning. Tyne predicted that the Dwarf would miss the Earth. It wouldn't even change the Earth's orbit greatly. But its terrific tidal pull would peel off the Earth's atmosphere and its seas, as Tyne put it, like the skin of an orange."

Barry Shane peered breathlessly down into that stark, bare abyss, which once the seas had filled. It was difficult to think of America without the Ring, of a world with no Outside. Waiting anxiously for the old man to light the pipe, he made no sound.

"Vic Barry found a way to protect America," the veteran went on. "He invented a new kind of ultradyne tube that created a static wall of ultra-electronic vibration. A globe-shaped warp in space is the thing we call the Ring."

Those words sounded bewildering and difficult. The boy looked

with worried eyes toward the invisible line that divided the peaceful life of the meadows and the sea from the brown, dead Outside. The words were hard to understand, but the Ring itself was real enough.

"It's transparent to light and gravity and radio waves," the old man went on. "But it's stronger than anything material like pressure—because the space warp, the engineers say, just turns pressure back against itself. Vic Barry designed an ultradyne tube big enough to protect all America. He installed it in the Ring Cylinder, in what is now Midwest Corporation. It was completed just a few weeks before the Dwarf came."

"Of course, the gravitation of the Dwarf reached through the Ring. There were tidal waves inside and terrible storms and quakes. But it stopped the great wave, which swept the rest of the Earth and it kept our air from escaping. Most of the coastal cities were destroyed, but America lived on."

Barry Shane looked back toward the brown, dead things Outside, that were now mercifully screened by the strip of weeds. He tried not to shudder.

"What about the other people Outside?" he whispered.

"They all perished. Vic Barry tried to save them. He built plenty of ultradyne tubes and sent one to every continent, with engineers to install it. But a war was going on. Some of the tubes were sunk by submarines and some of them were dive-bombed later. Finally, after the armistice, all the countries were too crippled to complete the installations in time."

"Of course, some refugees reached America. Vic Barry kept the Ring open till the last moment." He nodded gravely at the things beyond the weeds. "They came too late."

The boy turned away from the things Outside. The old man took his



Shane flung himself aside as the bullet broke the mirror

hand and they started back across the meadows toward the little blue cottage.

"Go on, Grampa," Barry urged.

"The Dwarf passed," the Guardsman resumed. "All the Earth Outside was swept clean of seas and air. Even the polar ice was broken up and floated away. The Moon was captured by the Dwarf and followed it away into space. The Age of the Ring began. You'll be studying about it in your history books. America had suffered. Millions were dead.

The coastal cities were ruined. Chicago, where your father lives, became the greatest city.

"You'll study about the Reconstruction. How America tried to adjust herself to real isolation. How science struggled to find substitutes for raw materials cut off by the Ring. How the forty-eight states were replaced with a dozen new Corporations, planned to give all the people the most liberty and security.

"You'll learn how Uranatomic Central Power was organized—and

how your father got control of it thirty years ago. How the monorail system was built. And how the Ring Guard was formed, after a reckless experimenter had made the first disastrous hole in the Ring."

Young Barry Shane looked back toward that tawny abyss of hostile mystery, where once the sea had flowed.

"One day," he said, "I'm going Outside."

Grandfather Barry shook his weary head.

"Many men have wanted to. We need the mineral wealth Outside—metals and oil and coal, uranium for your father's company. But there's a terrible danger."

His solemn eyes looked down at the boy.

"Remember, the invisible wall of the Ring is all that keeps America from being like Outside. The air is pressing out against it, fifteen pounds on every square inch, here at sea-level. If that pressure ever escapes, America will die. Nobody has ever found a safe way through the Ring. You can't burrow under it. The force goes down several miles.

"All you can do is go through it—only the Guard has to stop you, to protect our lives. Of course, that isn't their whole job. They also have to watch for any danger from Outside."

"What danger?" demanded Barry Shane.

"None, so far as we know," the old man said. "There's no evidence that anything alive exists Outside, but you've got to make routine check-ups on anything as important as the Ring. Some kind of weird life might develop and maybe attack it. I know it's wild, but why take chances?"

Barry Shane's vacation was over much too soon. He went back to his father's big house in Chicago Corporation, back to his books and his teachers. For three years he studied, read and played, but he never forgot

the mystery of the Ring.

At last his father let him come back to the little blue cottage by the Ring, for another vacation with his grandfather. He brought a Spanish dictionary, planning to try to read what he could of that ancient newspaper Outside.

Once more he waited for the patrol car to come and go. Eagerly he slipped across the dusty road again. This time he brushed away his tracks with his handkerchief.

He dropped in the weeds with his face against the Ring. He found the same brown, desicated things that he had found before. But when he looked for the torn newspaper, the icy touch of mystery made him shiver.

The newspaper he remembered so well was gone!

II

The Rock That Moved

WAS there life Outside, after all? Something must have taken that newspaper. Tense with a half-fearful excitement, Barry Shane ran back to the little blue cottage. Grandfather Barry was sitting on the porch, smoking. Breathlessly, the boy told him about the paper.

The old Guardsman unexcitedly tapped out his pipe.

"Other changes have been seen Outside," he said. "I used to wonder, but it's the meteors, they say. Meteors must fall often Outside. There's no air to burn them up and no Ring to turn them off. The things Outside are very dry and brittle. When a meteor strikes, they simply go to dust."

"Maybe," muttered the boy. "But I didn't see any dust."

Barry Shane was sixteen when he told his father that he had decided

to quit his business courses and enter the Ring Guard Academy. Patterson Shane was a big man and anger made him florid. He stamped up and down the long, formal library of the mansion beside Lake Michigan, bellowing:

"Don't be a fool, son! I've got your career all mapped out. You'll be a director in ten years. By the time I'm ready to retire, you can step into control of Uranatomic Central. One day, with what I can give you, you ought to be the biggest man in America. So you want to join the Guard!" He made an angry snort. "Why, I can give you more right now than you would earn in a lifetime in the Guard!"

He paused at the table, flung open a checkbook.

"I don't want money." Barry's voice trembled as he tried to find the words for the vague but powerful necessities that moved him. "Business and success aren't what I want. I want something real."

"What's more real than a million dollars?" roared Patterson Shane. "Except two millions?"

Barry tried to put his feelings into words.

"I'd like to find a safe way Outside, without making a dangerous break in the Ring," he explained. "That would be worth doing!" Enthusiasm electrified his voice. "I want adventure, danger and something worth fighting for. New deposits of uranium, even, for Uranatomic Central."

Patterson Shane's hard eyes narrowed shrewdly.

"Uranium? Well, at least that makes sense. What's the chance of finding any?"

"In the Academy I'll learn ultra-electronics," Barry went on. "I'll learn what the Ring really is and why all the attempts to make a door in it have resulted in disaster. If ever a way is found and an expedition is sent Outside, it will be in charge of

the Guard." His eyes looked far beyond the cramping walls. "I want to be among the first to go Outside!"

"If there's money in it, go ahead," said Patterson Shane. "Learn all you can at the Academy. Then I'll arrange for Uranatomic Central to finance your experiments—naturally for a controlling interest in all the deposits of uranium you find Outside."

"You don't understand." Barry tried to keep the bitterness out of his voice. "It isn't for money. It's for science. I want to know what's at the bottom of those chasms where the sea used to be. I want to know what happened to a torn newspaper that was taken from a mummy's hand beyond the Ring. I want to find out for myself if there's anything alive Outside."

"Go to the Academy!" shouted Patterson Shane. "Maybe they'll teach you a few practical things. I can't!"

SO BARRY SHANE went to Ring City, which was only a sleepy little town on the wheat fields of Midwest Corporation, two miles from the ancient gray bulk of the Ring Cylinder. Triumphant he passed the stiff entrance examinations at the Academy.

He spent five hard, happy years in the elm-shaded quadrangle of time-grayed buildings, almost in the shadow of the Cylinder itself. He grew up at the Academy, became a straight, gray-eyed six-footer.

But the great dream stayed with him. One day he dared to mention it to General Whitehall, who was commander of the Ring Guard and also instructor of the advanced classes in military tactics.

"Do you think, sir, that we can ever go Outside—without danger to the Ring, I mean? That's what I really want to do—explore the Outside."

Gravely the old general shook his

lean white head.

"It's a difficult problem, Shane," he said. "It's easy enough to rupture the Ring with an ultra-electronic vibration synchronized to interfere with its static field. That's why we have to keep the Guard on its toes. The effect is pretty much like puncturing a soap bubble with a hot needle. The balance of forces is broken. The rupture tends to spread. Fortunately the Ring can repair itself after the disrupting force is removed, unless the rupture has spread too far.

"That way through the Ring is comparatively simple. It requires only the fundamentals of ultra-electronics, which is why so many experimenters have been able to break through. Probably every one of them thought he had a new method. But that process is beyond control. It's like making a hole in a sheet of glass by shooting a bullet through it. It's so dangerous that the Guard must absolutely prohibit all experiments of that sort."

"Perhaps, sir," Shane suggested, "we can find another way."

"Perhaps," Whitehall admitted. "But men haven't been able to do it in two hundred years. We used to keep the Guard laboratory busy at the problem. But lately, with the Corporation Control Board cutting our appropriations every year, we have our hands full just to maintain the routine patrols."

"There must be a way," Shane insisted. "America needs it! There are minerals Outside that we need. One of these days the Guard might need to go Outside, to defend the Ring."

The general shrugged his thin shoulders.

"We've no enemies Outside."

"There's *something* Outside!"

Whitehall's keen blue eyes seemed sympathetic and friendly, so Shane told him about the newspaper that had vanished.

"Maybe a meteor powdered it," he

finished. "But I don't think so. I think something came and took it."

"That's not much evidence," the old man commented. "Our Ring patrols have been watching the Outside for nearly two hundred years and they haven't seen anything alive."

"I know that, sir," agreed Barry Shane. "But still I'd like to know what happened to that newspaper."

AT GRADUATION, Shane stood first in the little class of twenty men. Since the latest economy drive, the entire Ring Guard numbered only a hundred and sixty. It was fifteen years since the last would-be explorer had broken through the Ring, in a rocket plane that had crashed and exploded Outside. No others had been killed that time, and danger to the Ring had begun to seem remote.

From the Academy, Shane was ordered to Key West Base. Ten men under Captain Steadman were stationed at the ancient sun-washed town on that low coral isle. They were responsible for more than a thousand miles of the Ring, which chopped off the shallow sea, with its vast, invisible curve, a mile beyond the island.

Shane was assigned to the north flight. Every other day, in a silent little patrol plane driven by the monofilm storage cells that his father's Uranatomic Central charged and distributed, he flew fifteen hundred miles over the calm Atlantic, along the Ring.

The plane was designed for two men, pilot and observer, but the reduced numbers of the Guard had left only one man available for each flight. After all, here over the Atlantic, there couldn't be much danger to the Ring. Ambitious Americans had usually made their suicidal attempts to penetrate the Ring from a land base, frequently somewhere in the lonely arid hills of New Mexico Cor-

poration. And there was no danger from Outside.

Shane himself was tired of wondering what had happened to that Spanish newspaper.

The months went by. He made a hundred flights. The sea within was always different in its living response to wind and sky, yet it bore no hint of peril to the Ring.

The Outside, for all its passive hostility, never seemed to change. Beyond the Ring's endless curve, the dead sea-bottom stretched and sloped away. There were cracked flats of age-dried mud; range on range of rugged mountains that once the sea had covered. The Outside could hold no danger while the Ring remained unbroken.

Then he saw the rock that moved.

It was his hundred-and-fourth flight northward. The morning sun was bright on the spume-flecked sea beneath him. Beyond the Ring, it drove harshly out of a black sky. Every pinnacle glinted with burning light and cast a long midnight shadow.

A black blade of shadow stabbed toward Shane across a red mud-flat. Startled, he looked for what had moved. He saw a rugged brown boulder, lurching queerly through a shallow pass in a far-off wall of black-shadowed hills.

With binoculars fast to his eyes, he forgot the danger to himself. In a moment the rock had ceased to move. It looked harmless as any rugged sea-worn stone, but he knew that it had moved. Its shadow had been a leaping blade. He studied it for a bewildered moment longer.

The plane had been designed for two men because of the danger of accidents. It was necessary for patrols to fly reasonably close to the Ring, but that invisible barrier was as deadly in collision as a concrete wall.

Abruptly Shane realized that the sky was turning black before him.

Without thinking, he had turned the plane in the direction in which he was looking.

He was flying into the Ring!

DESPERATELY he brought back the stick, lifted the little plane into a loop. The reaction was an instant too late. At a glancing angle the plane crashed into the unseen wall. The prop was shattered. The electric motors whined and stopped. The shaken machine fluttered down toward the lonely sea.

Shane wasn't aware of much pain at first. He knew that his face had smashed against the cowling. He felt ill, yet he was angry at himself for causing a stupid accident and he was tense with the shock of the thing he had seen.

Stinging blood blinded him. He wiped it out of his eyes and snapped on the radio. His face felt oddly numb and the salt sweetness of blood was hot in his mouth.

"Patrol Eighteen, calling Key West Base!" he croaked through swelling lips. "Shane, calling—"

"Go ahead, Patrol Eighteen," a bored voice rasped.

"Patrol Eighteen, reporting a moving object Outside," gasped Shane. "It's camouflaged to look like a boulder, but it was moving when I first saw it. It was coming through the hills in Sector Forty-one B." That report seemed the important thing. He caught his breath and added, "Plane crippled. I ran into the Ring. I'm falling. Do you hear me, Key West Base? Patrol Eighteen, reporting a moving object—"

"Forget your moving object." The humming voice was cold with disbelief. "A rescue plane will start at once."

In the little mirror on the windshield, Shane saw a queer red mask that he knew had to be his own face. But it didn't look familiar. The cheek and temple were cut to the bone. Loose skin hung over one eye.

Something had happened to the nose. He didn't care much. Looks weren't so important in the Guard, anyhow.

The blue, tossing ocean came up to meet him too steeply, but there wasn't much he could do about it. The stick was useless.

Water exploded against the pontoons. Spray drenched him, began to sting his face, yet the plane didn't sink. The rudder still worked and he managed to hold the bow into the wind. It would float longer that way. He had to keep afloat because he had to make a report of the moving rock. He had to make the Guard believe it.

The tossing waves became waves of dark oblivion, but still, with his feet on the rudders, he fought them. He didn't let go. He held out until the rescue plane dropped beside him. He caught the tossed rope and knotted it around him before he slipped into the waves.

III

The Flash in the Jungle

AFTER Barry hit the water, everything became a jumble. The rope was hauling him through cold brine. There was a rock that moved. Men were carrying him on a stretcher. He was trying to tell them something about a rock that moved. His face was sticky and stiff and throbbing.

Then he was in a plane again. It was his own patrol plane, and he was searching for a rock that moved. His face was bandaged now, so he couldn't tell anybody anything. A nurse was talking to him.

"Breathe," she repeated endlessly. "Just relax and breathe deeply."

At last he slowly awoke in a clean hospital room. Its walls were creamy plastoid. Through a broad window he could see a strip of green park,

then deep blue water with a white-winged eleetroplane soaring over it. Even before his mother came in, he knew he was back in Chicago Corporation.

His mother had a tired, sweet face and a wisp of gray in her dark hair. She, too, had always seemed happier on their vacation trips, but she had been a good wife and housekeeper for Patterson Shane.

"I'm sorry, Mother." Barry Shane's voice sounded oddly weak through the bandages that held his lips. "Has anything happened?"

She didn't know what he meant, didn't know that he had seen anything Outside, only that he had crashed into the Ring. He made her promise to send a radiogram to General Whitehall at the Ring Headquarters.

"I'll send it," she agreed. "But don't you think you might have been mistaken?" She smiled at the stiff little shake of his head. "Don't worry, I'll send it." Her blue eyes shone. "I wanted to be the one to tell you, Barry. You're going to be all right!"

Then he remembered the red, mangled face he had seen in the mirror.

"Dr. Rand did it," she said. "The greatest plastic surgeon. They wouldn't let me see, but I guess you were pretty bad. We had to send pictures to guide Dr. Rand. The nurse let me see your face when she changed the dressing this morning."

Her tired face smiled again.

"It isn't quite the same," she said. "I guess the pictures were retouched too much. Your mole is gone and the little scar on your lip. Nobody else will mind but your mother. Dr. Rand is really wonderful."

A nurse came in and said it was time for his mother to go.

"Don't forget," he said. "Send a message to General Whitehall."

Next morning the nurse let him see his face. Remembering that red, lacerated mask, he couldn't repress a little shudder. The only scars left

were tiny white lines, already vanishing. His face looked a little different—as his mother had said, retouched. But Dr. Rand was wonderful.

The mirror was still in his hands when a girl came in. She was tall and efficient-looking, and she almost glowed with a dark, vital beauty. His heart skipped a beat as she walked toward him.

"Good morning, Lieutenant."

Her voice was crisp and throaty. He liked her voice, the creamy glow of her skin, dark eyes, and the luster of her close-shingled hair. He couldn't guess what she wanted. Suddenly the mirror embarrassed him and he tried to slip it under the sheets.

"Oh." Intelligence flashed in her eyes. "You don't remember. I'm Rand." She ignored his astonished gasp. "Will you turn your face to the light, please?"

Her cool fingers touched the scars so lightly that they caused no pain at all. His nostrils caught the faint, pleasant scent of her hair. He wanted to hear her cool, crisp voice again, longed to see what a smile would do to her alert, business-like face.

"Thank you for all you've done." His stiff face tried to grin and he felt a twinge of pain. "If I had known that doctors were like you—"

She didn't smile.

"Don't move your face," she said briskly. "Wait until the local wears off. You're doing nicely, Lieutenant. You'll be out in a week."

As she turned to go, a panic struck him. He wanted to do something to make her stay, but he couldn't think of anything. She must be busy and he was just another case.

"By, Lieutenant. See you again."

He stared at the creamy plastoid wall. If he had followed his father's road, there might have been a chance. But there was no possibility that a famous surgeon would give up her career for a cottage at a Ring

Guard base.

He shut his eyes to shut her out. There she stood again, vital and alert, with the little half-frown of concentration on her forehead.

Barry wondered if she ever took time to smile. . . .

NEXT afternoon General Whitehall called. The commander of the Ring Guard was slender and precise and erect. His abundant hair was white, but he carried his seventy years easily. In a thin, kindly face, his blue eyes were shrewdly intelligent.

"Well, Lieutenant!" His voice always seemed surprisingly, deliberately gruff. "I received a message from your mother and I thought I had better see you. What's the trouble?"

"My report, sir." Shane was a little breathless with anxiety. "I wanted to be sure my report got through."

General Whitehall looked puzzled. "What report?"

"The reason I happened to smash into the Ring," Shane said urgently. "I saw something move Outside. It was coming up through the hills in Sector Forty-one B, disguised to look like a boulder. It stopped an instant afterward."

A smile softened the general's thin gray face.

"Maybe it was a boulder," he said. "I know you're certain, but men in the Guard have imagined things before. The Outside is strange, mysterious, hostile. It is easy to let it get on your nerves."

"But," Shane insisted, "it did move, sir!"

The general smiled tolerantly.

"If it will help your peace of mind, Shane, I have ordered the north patrol from Key West doubled." He took an envelope out of his blue uniform. "And, here are photographs made this morning of the hills in Sector 41-B."

Eagerly Shane scanned the prints. There were the sharp-lit, black-shadowed hills. There was the winding pass. But the stone that had moved was gone! In a low voice he told General Whitehall that.

"Now you've got to believe me, sir!" he protested.

"It is the duty of the Guard to watch for any possible danger to the Ring, from within America or from the Outside. In view of your report, this sector will be watched with the utmost attention."

"But still, sir," Barry challenged, "you don't believe me!"

The general shook his head. "I've served fifty years in the Guard," he said, almost forgetting to be gruff. "In that time, there have been several similar reports, yet no actual threat to the Ring has ever materialized—from Outside. Personally, I think you are letting your imagination play tricks on you."

He moved to go.

"That doesn't mean your report will be ignored," he explained. "But I am going to advise Captain Steadman that you be relieved of active flight duty for three months. Key West is a good place to rest. Perhaps that is what you need."

Tears of angry humiliation stung Shane's eyes. He blinked hard.

"Yes, sir," he gulped. "Thank you, sir."

TWO weeks later Shane was back

at Key West. Captain Steadman assured him that nothing unusual had been reported since his accident, from Sector 41-B or anywhere else. The men made good-natured jokes about seeing rocks and other inanimate things that moved.

Shane rented a little boat and learned to sail. He had been relieved of duty and there was nothing else to do. He began to wonder whether the general wasn't right, if it hadn't been his nerves. Sun and salt air and the pleasant occupation of sailing

might help them relax.

But he couldn't help returning to the Ring. It was strange to sail along the brink of that abrupt, wet precipice, looking down upon the dry coral and the dead brown weed and the white, gleaming sand. His searching gaze could rove far across that parched, harshly-lit waste, even to the bare hills that had once been Cuba. Nowhere was there anything that moved.

But he did find the moving boulder—inside the Ring!

He had sailed along the barrier for thirty miles. Tacking back toward the low green blots of the mangrove keys, he crossed a coral shoal. The water was clear as glass. Against the white coral sand he saw a dark, jagged boulder that was crawling steadily toward the land.

Barry Shane could hardly breathe. His tanned body suddenly felt cold, and his hand trembled on the tiller. As the moving object tipped into deeper water, he saw it well enough. It looked like the same boulder that he had seen lurching through the hills in Sector 41-B. It was a disguised machine!

Somebody had solved the old problem. Somebody had found his greatest dream, had learned to go and come at will through the Ring, without any disastrous explosions of air.

Or was it *somebody*? Cold dread tingled up and down his spine. Perhaps it was *something*. The Outside was a gulf of forbidden mystery. The passing Dwarf might have peopled it with alien beings. It was a fantastic speculation.

He forgot it—and suddenly remembered the riddle of the vanished newspaper.

Here was the secret he wanted. His cold tenseness passed. He felt oddly calm.

This was the moment he had lived for. Whatever it might bring, he was ready.

He let out more sail, and the little

boat heeled as he tacked toward the palm-fringed mangrove keys. He estimated the direction in which the crawling rock had moved and drew a line on his chart.

When it came to land, he would be waiting.

Of course, he had no weapon. He grinned at the dark subtropic jungle ahead. After all, he didn't know what sort of weapon might be needed. The little camera slung to his belt might be equipment enough. Film, anyhow, couldn't be accused of imagining things.

He sailed along a broad coral beach, past a straggling line of coconut palms, and pushed the boat into concealing mangroves. The stalking monorail towers were half a mile away. A car sighed along the high rail, a silver blur of speed. But this was jungle wilderness.

A big-kneed cypress was festooned with blue morning-glories. A lone sea-grape spread its odd broad leaves. Mosquitoes hummed and silent black sand-flies settled painfully on his skin.

Out among the waxen-leaved mangroves a rattler whined.

Hidden, he waited. He fought mosquitoes as he watched and listened. The sun went down. The shallow sea changed through a thousand shades of blue and aquamarine and became a calm mirror for the purple night.

HE BEGAN to wonder if his eyes had tricked him. His impulsive plan seemed a little foolish. Perhaps General Whitehall was right about the tricks of imagination.

After all—

A muffled humming sounded over the black water! Something splashed. At last, a faint phosphorescence outlined a dark, jagged shape that was lumbering up the beach. It was the same boulder that he had seen in the hills Outside! Deliberately it crawled across the open

stretch of coral sand and went crashing into the dark tangle of the mangroves.

The little camera trembled in Shane's hand. He opened the diaphragm wide and snapped a half dozen shots. The film was ultrasensitive. Perhaps it would show something. He ran to where the boulder had crossed the beach, ventured to strike a shaded match. In the white sand were the unmistakable prints of caterpillar tracks.

He snapped the camera again and peered toward the humming in the jungle.

Shuddery dread seized him. He fought it off, caught his breath and groped for reason.

Did this disguised machine have a crew of men? Had some group of Americans built it to slip through the Guard and the Ring, to reach the mineral wealth of the Outside? Or was it operated by some alien, unimaginable invaders? Another idea struck him. Had human beings somehow managed to survive beyond the Ring? That seemed impossible. In two hundred years, he remembered, there had been no evidence of life Outside—except that vanished newspaper.

Shane decided to follow that crawling boulder into the jungle. He couldn't be certain that his photographs would show anything by starlight alone. If he didn't follow it, the machine might go back into the sea before he had learned the answers to any of those desperate questions. Crouching, he stepped out upon the road the heavy caterpillar tracks had made.

Flash!

A point of painful violet winked at him and was gone. It wasn't bright, yet it hurt his eyes. His body tingled, and his muscles went limp. A terrible hand closed with agonizing pressure on his heart. He couldn't breathe. The camera fell out of his hand, and he dropped flat.

IV

The Outsider

A CRUSHING weight lay on Shane's chest. The beat of his heart was agonized and slow. It took all his will to draw a tiny gasp of breath. His tingling body was numb and useless. That dull violet flash had somehow completely paralyzed him. Above the slow throb of his pulse he heard the muffled hum of that disguised machine. The crashing in the mangroves came near again and the damp rough coral trembled under him. He knew the machine was coming back.

His eyes were dim and aching. It was hard to move them and the focus was blurred, but he saw the dark, jagged bulk lurch into the range of his vision. It stopped and the humming ceased. Metal clanged hollowly. A dim, tall thing emerged.

He strained his throbbing eyes, forgot the agony of his heart and the labor of breathing. The tingling over his body was suddenly a deep chill. His fancy tried to paint an alien monstrosity. Then his heart went on, and he breathed again, for a low human voice had spoken.

"Hullo."

That was all. A tiny light dazzled Shane. He could neither close his eyes nor turn them away. He felt hands going through his pockets and heard a familiar click as the stranger opened his camera, but there was nothing he could do.

Strong hands lifted his lax body and he was completely powerless to resist. He couldn't even keep his head from being bumped painfully against the top of the low doorway. He was carried into the machine and dropped unceremoniously upon a hard, narrow bunk.

The air had a faint, sharp, chem-

ical smell. There was a clang as the door closed. The shoes of his captor grated on a metal floor. There were no voices, and he guessed that the man was alone.

Glaring blue lights came on, but Shane, from where he had been dumped, couldn't see his captor. A bare metal wall and a tangle of tubes and cables above him were all he saw. He tried to speak, but his paralyzed vocal chords made no sounds. Breathing took all his efforts.

"Lieutenant Barry Shane." That startled him, until he realized that the man must be reading from the identification card in his wallet. "Division Eleven, Ring Guard, Key West Base."

The hard voice puzzled him. The accent was queer, too careful. Suddenly he thought he understood, froze to a cold touch of horror. That accent, he was certain, wasn't American. His captor was an Outsider!

"Lieutenant," the voice told him, "you will do."

But Shane scarcely heard. His brain spun as he tried to think. The impossible was true. Somehow—somewhere—men had survived Outside. What would they be like after two centuries? Did this mean a friendly visit or armed invasion?

The footsteps moved away. Motors hummed and the machine lurched into motion. A radio blared abruptly, modulated, picked up a newscast. Laboring to breathe, Shane thought of all that an unsuspected enemy could learn about American affairs, defenses and the language, by listening to the radio.

Water slapped against the hull. The radio went silent. Shane knew that the machine had crawled back under the sea.

He tried to fight the paralysis that numbed him. Desperate necessity spurred him. He had to find out who the Outsiders were and what they planned. He had to escape with his

warning. He struggled for control of his body, and slowly the paralysis ebbed.

FIRST he was able to wink his smarting eyes. Then he could move his lips and finally manage to shift his cramped arms. The pain left his heart, and it was easier to breathe. At last, he ventured to move his head.

He could see a little more of the machine's interior. The machine was all metal. There was no wood, no plastic. The bolts and screws all had curious triangular heads. Evidently the builders of this machine had been out of touch with America for a long time, he thought.

Then he saw, pasted on the metal wall, a bathing-girl cover from a popular magazine published in Chicago Corporation. He could see the date—three years ago. Perhaps this wasn't his captor's first trip into the Ring!

Still he couldn't see the Outsider. Desperately Shane's eyes searched for some possible weapon. He found a thick brass cylinder, clipped to the wall above him, that looked like a fire extinguisher. Perhaps that would serve, but the paralysis still gripped his hands and his feet. It seemed that only the deeper nerves, which had not completely ceased to function, were recovering. He couldn't even close his fingers yet. The attack would have to wait.

Despair seized him when the humming motors stopped. There was only the whir of a fan and a slow hissing, perhaps from oxygen valves. Hastily Shane rolled his head back where it had been and deliberately lay still.

Shoes rang on the metal floor. Strong hands rolled him over on the bunk. His eyes blinked against the unshaded blue light. For the first time he saw his captor. He lay there, staring. There was nothing else that he could do.

The Outsider was about Shane's own height. He wore tight trousers and a close-belted tunic of some unfamiliar lustrous gray material. His bearing was erect and military. He had coppery hair and a stiff reddish little toothbrush mustache. His tanned face was rather handsome. Shane couldn't help thinking that he would look well in the blue of the Ring Guard.

"You're coming out of it," the man said, his voice so crisp and rapid that Shane almost forgot the accent. Its staccato tempo reminded him a little of a certain radio announcer. "I believe that you're precisely the sort of man I came for, but I want to talk to you, Lieutenant."

He lifted Shane's head almost gently and thrust a pillow under it. "Can you speak?"

Shane opened his mouth in a pretense of feeble effort. He drew another gasping breath and tried to make his face convey a mute apprehension.

"Don't be alarmed," the tall man said. "Some of your motor nerves are paralyzed, but the ray didn't reach your heart or anything vital. The short-circuiting is temporary due to a reversible change in the myelin nerve-sheath. You'll be better soon."

He moved Shane's arm to a less cramping position.

"Comfortable? Let me introduce myself. I'm Captain Glenn Clayton. As soon as you are able to speak I am going to be forced to ask you for certain information: If you supply it, you will be treated with the dignity that a fellow-soldier deserves."

Captain Clayton didn't say what would happen if the information were not supplied. His efficient and aggressive manner suggested that he was confident it would be supplied sooner or later. It occurred to Shane that that paralyzing light would be an effective instrument of torture, even though it left no mark.

WHAT, he wondered, was Clayton captain of? Probably he himself was more anxious to obtain information than the other man. But his hands and feet were still useless, and Captain Clayton looked hard, ruthless and alert.

"Soon you'll be able to talk," Clayton said. "I'll tell you now what I want to know—everything about America. Particularly I want to know about the Barrier—the Ring, you call it. The location and defenses of the Ring Cylinder and the numbers, disposition and equipment of the Ring Guard. Your capture was very fortunate for my purpose, Lieutenant."

He moved out of Shane's sight, came back with two pairs of bright, jingling handcuffs and a big queer-looking gun.

"I must ask you to submit to these," he said. "You'll soon be recovering and repeated use of the paralysis beam would be permanently injurious to your nerves. Then we'll be free to talk without interruption about your Ring and the Guard."

He bent and caught Shane's shoulder. Shane's hands were numb and dead. He couldn't even clench them into effective fists. His feet were lifeless, too, and this lean fighting man was too grimly watchful to give him any real chance. The thick bright tube, Shane guessed, was the paralysis gun.

But Clayton's words somehow sent his mind back to the Ring Guard Academy. He thought of the old gymnasium, with its faint peculiar smell of stale sweat and disinfectant and the hard mats on the plastoid floor. The physical combat director's dry, precise voice seemed to be rasping again:

"Now we shall take up the case of attack against an armed opponent, when both hands and feet are fettered or otherwise incapacitated. Like all combat it is a question of the

intelligent use of the weapons available. In this case, those weapons are weight, the massive muscles of the back and legs, the grasping power of the teeth—"

Barry Shane forgot this strange machine. The hard bunk under him became a sweat-stale mat and Captain Glenn Clayton was only another Guard cadet. He twisted off the bunk. His butting head struck aside the weapon. His teeth caught a firm hold of the flesh and skin above Clayton's wrist. His feet were useless, so he had to come down on his knees, but even that put him under his opponent. His head went down, and he heaved.

Clayton tried to fight. His left fist, with the jingling manacles in it, struck painfully against the side of Shane's head. But pain didn't matter now. Anyhow, his skin was still too dead to feel sharply.

In fractions of a second it was ended. Clayton went over his head and struck the metal wall behind the bunk. He dropped upon it, rolled off on the floor, and lay there.

The rest of it was more difficult than that. Using his elbows and his knees, Shane scraped the manacles out from under Clayton. With his teeth he pushed the open jaws over Clayton's wrists and closed them with the pressure of his knees. With the second pair he secured Clayton's ankle to the rail of the bunk.

By the time that was done, Shane was able to stand on his tingling feet. A little life had come back into his hands. He picked up the weapon Clayton had dropped and tried it on the wall. A thin blade of dull violet stabbed out when he pressed the thumb-key. He knew that this was the paralysis gun.

With stiff, numb fingers, he searched Clayton's pockets. He found a ring of keys, a metal-handled knife, and a thin platinum case that evidently took the place of a wallet. Nothing about Clayton was

made of leather. His shoes and his belt were of a gray, pliant synthetic. His only adornment was a heavy platinum ring. Clayton remained unconscious, breathing heavily.

Shane's numbed fingers managed to open the platinum case. A fabric pocket contained a dozen platinum coins. Shane read the inscription on one.

"New Britain — 161 — ten pounds." On the reverse, beside a crouching lion: "Always England."

Shane whistled softly and stared down at the tall officer. This was astounding. These precisely milled coins, together with the machine and Clayton himself, meant that a strong culture existed Outside. If New Britain, whatever and wherever it was, had been strong enough to survive Outside, it was strong enough to be a possible menace to the Ring and to America. Clayton's visit didn't exactly have the manner of a peaceful expedition.

UNDER the pocket, Shane found a picture. He almost whistled again. He forgot his prisoner, staring at the picture. It was enameled in color on the inside top of the case. It showed a girl with violet eyes and red-brown hair. The red lips were smiling, but the eyes seemed oddly grave.

Shane's eyes still ached a little from the paralysis ray. He strained them to see, until the picture almost came alive. It was exquisite artistry. The incredible beauty of the girl created a new pain in his heart. He read the inscription below:

To Glenn
from Atlantis

Was that her name, or her dwelling, or just a lover's reference that only he and she would understand?

Shane took another sober look at Captain Clayton. Even while he lay unconscious and shackled, the tall

Outside officer looked handsome, dashing and formidable.

Barry Shane's next and most alarming discovery came through sheer accident. His fingers were still numb from the paralysis ray. As he turned the metal case around, examining it closely, it slipped from his uncertain grasp and fell. His clumsy effort to catch it only sent it clattering against the metal wall.

When he picked it up, he found that the picture of the disturbingly lovely girl had slipped out of its place. Surprisingly it was on a separate platinum rectangle. Beneath it a narrow secret compartment was revealed. Several folded sheets of dark, tough metal foil had been hidden there.

Eagerly Shane unfolded them. They were covered with writing in white ink. Another, on a thin sheet of gray metal, read:

The bearer, Captain Glenn Clayton, acts with full authority for the Black Star. Our enemies must be destroyed.

Beneath, like a signature or a seal, appeared a star-shaped symbol. Glittering black, it seemed to be within the gray metal, rather than merely stamped upon it. It was a complex pattern, full of tiny lines and delicate shadings. He wondered briefly how it had been made.

Shane read the words twice, with narrowed eyes. Alarmed questions spun in his brain. What was the Black Star? Had the people Outside planned some insane attack against America? That was what those words ominously suggested.

He returned the scraps of foil to their shallow cavity and snapped the picture back into place. Questioningly he stared at the gravely smiling girl. She was too beautiful to have any part in such a plot.

Clayton's easy voice abruptly startled him.

"Well, Lieutenant, congratulations!"

V

The Letter from Atlantis

SHANE stepped back watchfully, holding the paralysis gun level. "I mean that, Shane," Clayton spoke from his awkward position on the floor. His manacled hands came up as he tenderly fingered the back of his head. "I don't know how you did it. You hit me like a meteor!" He grinned. "I thought you Americans would be fat and soft from the easy living in the Ring."

Shane gestured alertly with the gun. "Sit up on the bunk," he ordered. "You'll be more comfortable. Now it's my turn to ask for a little information."

Clayton sat on the bunk and let his fettered ankle swing. His shrewd greenish eyes studied Shane, yet they held no alarm. Shane felt that he still had a self-confident and formidable opponent. Clayton laughed, an easy, ringing laugh.

"I see that I had better explain," he said smoothly. "Really I let caution get the better of me. I must have seemed unfriendly. I want you to understand, Shane, that my purposes in coming through the Ring are altogether frank and open. I had no plans for anything except the mutual benefit of America and my people."

Shane's eyes narrowed. That didn't quite fit the message signed with the black star. He kept the paralysis gun ready.

"Yes," he said grimly. "I guess you had better explain."

"I see you've examined my pocket cases." Clayton's greenish eyes were alert. "You must have gathered some ideas. What do you want to know?"

Shane closed the case, hoping that Clayton didn't suspect he had found

the hidden compartment. He sat down on a little metal stool, well beyond Clayton's possible reach. The air-machine hummed and hissed behind him, but it was more important, just now, to question Clayton than to explore his amazing amphibian vehicle.

"Tell me about New Britain."

Clayton's hard, lean face went blank.

"Oh, the coins." His green eyes flashed with understanding. "The history of New Britain begins two hundred years ago, when America set up the Ring to protect herself and left the rest of the world to perish—"

"That's not true," objected Shane. "Ring tubes were supplied to every continent. It's no fault of America that they were all destroyed. Our own Ring was kept open until the last possible minute."

"That's your version of history," said Clayton. "I thought you wanted mine."

"Sorry. Go on."

A fierce pride illuminated Clayton's ruthless face.

"Old Britain couldn't save the seas that she had always ruled, but her people were used to fighting for their lives. They had survived bombing raids and invasion attempts. When the Dwarf came with its greater danger, they fought with the same determination to survive."

SHANE sensed his pride, felt a sudden liking and admiration for this confident man and the resolute race of Outsiders.

"German bombers wrecked the Barrier tube," Clayton went on. "Peace came too late for repairs. As the Dwarf approached, people took refuge in mines, deep bomb shelters and submarines. My own ancestors were swept out to sea in a rowboat. The Dwarf's gravitation lowered the pressure of the waters, churning huge monsters up from the depths.

They clawed blindly at the rowboat, almost capsizing it. But guns weren't necessary against the beasts. They exploded right after reaching the air. My ancestors had to chop the dead monsters away from the boats or be overturned.

"Only a few Britons survived, of course. My ancestors managed to reach what remained of the land and slipped into a shelter just before the vast tidal wave swept over everything that hadn't been destroyed in the war. Those who lived were faced with a terrible task. You can imagine the difficulties of existing in a world without atmosphere or surface water."

Shane nodded. "I've seen the Outside."

"The people were tough," Clayton said proudly. "Every danger made them great enough to meet the next. They wrote epics of progress. They made pressure suits out of gas-masks. They built little pressure domes, searched England for the means of survival. Oxygen was their great need. The stored cylinders in the shelters soon ran low. They used chemicals to replenish the air, then electrolysis of water. That called for electric power.

"All the old combustion engines were useless, of course, after the air was gone. Materials for electric batteries were soon used up. For a time things were very desperate. Scarcely a hundred Britons were left alive when Sanders invented the gold-film cell, which absorbs and stores the energy of sunlight, with eighty per cent efficiency.

"After a few years another disaster fell. The underground waters ebbed out of the old continental plateau. The wells went dry—wells that supplied vital oxygen, as well as merely water. The Britons had to follow the migrating waters. They moved southwest, to the floor of the dry Atlantic. It was a strange migration."

Triumph rang in Clayton's hard voice.

"Some of their vehicles were converted war tanks, fitted with sun-power wings. At last they reached New Britain, three thousand miles due east of here. They drilled new wells and installed new power plants under the sub-tropic sun. They opened rich mines and invented new processes. They built New Dover Dome. They overcame a thousand difficulties. Their numbers grew. Now there are a dozen dome-cities."

The handcuffs jingled on Clayton's wrists. His hard green eyes fell to the queer weapon that Shane held. Suddenly he appeared defiant.

"That's the history of New Britain," he rapped out.

"A splendid history," Shane admitted. "But why didn't your people communicate with America long ago? We might have been able to help."

"Perhaps." Clayton sounded skeptical and bitter. "It's three thousand miles to New Britain. Until the ion-blast rocket was perfected fifteen years ago, we had no means of covering such a distance. America was only a legend. Our first explorers were surprised to find that the Barrier really existed."

"What about radio?" demanded Shane. "Radio waves can pass through the Ring. Didn't you pick up our broadcasts?"

CLAYTON grinned. "Conditions are different Outside, even for radio communication. Here, inside the Barrier, it is the ionized layer in the upper atmosphere that reflects radio waves back to the surface, so that they can be picked up beyond the horizon. Outside, there's no real ionosphere, but there are traces of atmospheric gases that are sometimes ionized.

"The sun causes powerful disturbances that make any sort of transmission almost impossible by

day. Even at night, communication is usually limited to the horizon. The result is that radio isn't much more useful Outside than a signal light would be."

"I see. What do you want in America?"

He thought something flickered in Clayton's eyes.

"I came to get help," said the lean prisoner. "The old disaster is repeating itself. There is no rain, of course, to replenish our wells. They are going dry again. I have come to beg for water for life itself! We've enough to offer in return. Our mines and petroleum deposits are very rich. In exchange for water we can offer oil, coal, metals and charged gold-film cells."

Shane's eyes narrowed.

"America needs those things," he agreed. "But why did you wait so long to ask if you discovered America fifteen years ago? Why the secrecy?" He jerked Clayton's gun at the magazine picture pasted on the wall. "You must have been in America before."

"I've been in and out half a dozen times in the last two years," the prisoner confessed. "Listening to your radio and trying to gather a few facts. I found that picture in an abandoned farmhouse in the Canada

Corporation. I was the first to come through the Barrier. It took some time to perfect the polarizers that make the passage possible. The men who discovered the Barrier were careful to keep out of sight. They found corpses outside the Ring."

His voice ended on a bitter note.

"Oh!" Shane stared. "They found the bodies Outside where the Ring cuts off the coast?" He caught his breath. "And they carried away a newspaper?"

"I believe they did," Clayton said. "It was printed in a language that nobody could read. Somebody missed it, eh? It was stupid of them to take it."

"What was the reason for all this?"

Clayton's malachite eyes glittered alertly.

"An obvious precaution. There was a legend that America had been pretty ruthless in shutting the rest of mankind out of the Barrier. The mummies seemed to confirm that. You don't have too much water even inside the Barrier. We had no reason to expect generosity."

Shane met the hard, searching gaze.

"I believe that America will trade you the water you need," he said, "or even give it to you. But I wish

THE ADVENTURES OF

IT SMELLS GRAND



SMELL A WHIFF—
IT SMELLS RIGHT JOLLY!

IT PACKS RIGHT



CUT TO PACK JUST RIGHT, BY GOLLY!

your approach had been less furtive."

"Perhaps you don't believe me," Clayton challenged. "Then take a look at the letter I brought from my government to yours. It's in the safe under the control board. Look in the upper compartment."

The hiss of oxygen was louder in the pilot room. The cramped space was crowded with unfamiliar instruments. Shane found a heavy envelope of gray metal foil in the open locker. Hastily he returned to where he could keep a watchful eye on the wily Outsider.

"It isn't sealed," said Clayton. "Read it."

Shane unfolded the thick sheet of tough, pliant gray metal. It was printed in white ink which, against the gray sheet, was easy to read.

To the Government of America,
Greetings:

Captain Glenn Clayton, the bearer of these presents, brings you our desire for peace and friendship. He will explain in full detail the desperate need of our people. Please consider them with the generosity of the strong for the perishing.

Atlantis Lee, Secretary,
League of New Britain
Level Ten, New Dover

Shane folded the thick metal sheet and replaced it in the stiff envelope.

It was convincing—almost. But the ominous little note in the secret compartment, bearing the curiously mottled and striated star-shaped seal, was not yet explained. In addition, Clayton's whole manner betrayed a veiled hostility.

"Who," Shane asked, "is Atlantis Lee?"

The handcuffs jingled as Clayton moved abruptly.

"You were just admiring her, eh?" The hard voice had a snap of ill-concealed resentment. "As the letter indicates, she's Secretary of New Britain."

"A ruler?"

"Scarcely a ruler," Clayton dis-sented. "Her father, the previous secretary, was the leader of a democratic union of the dome-cities. But the political picture has changed since the Barrier was discovered. An old and long suppressed political party, called the Black Star, has come back into power. The leader of the Black Star has most of the actual power in New Britain."

Remembering the note, Shane tried not to start.

"Who is that?" he demanded.

IN RESPONSE to his question Clayton yawned elaborately. "The

[Turn page]

UNCLE WALTER

IT SMOKES SWEET



A MERRY SMOKE—Sir Walter Raleigh!

IT CAN'T BITE!



SIR WALTER RALEIGH'S BLEND OF CHOICE KENTUCKY BURLEYS IS EXTRA-BLEND TO GUARD AGAINST TONGUE BITE. THE LARGE SIZE CANISTER OF SIR WALTER RALEIGH—in a BEAUTIFUL YULETIDE PACKAGE—MAKES THE PERFECT CHRISTMAS GIFT!

Black Star is a secret party. Even though it has won power, there are still embittered factions who make all the trouble they can. The real identity of the leader is supposed to be unknown to anybody else."

"How does a secret leader function?"

"The leader has the Black Star seal," Clayton explained. "The seal is said to be made of an artificially radioactive crystal. It makes a peculiarly delicate oxidation pattern on the metal foil that is used for official documents, an impression that cannot be counterfeited. The leader of the Black Star is supposed to select his own successor and pass the seal on to him."

So that was the meaning of the star-shaped imprint!

"Evidently," Shane said, "you're a member of the Black Star."

The hidden note, which gave Clayton full authority to act against the enemies of the Black Star, seemed proof enough of that.

"If so, I couldn't tell you," the tall Outsider said easily.

Shane decided to say nothing about the note.

"Another thing." He changed the subject. "How do you get through the Ring?"

"The device is called a polarizer," Clayton told him. "There are two units, in case one goes wrong. I don't know how it works, but you pull a lever and the *Friendship* flies right through, just as if the Ring didn't exist."

"This is the *Friendship*?" Shane was astonished. "It can fly?"

"Sure." Clayton nodded casually. "Ion-blast rockets, powered from the gold-film cells. It would be difficult to enter the Barrier without them, against the pressure of your atmosphere. The rockets easily lift us above it."

Shane caught his breath.

"A remarkable machine," he commented, "for something that looks like an ordinary boulder."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Clayton said smoothly. "May I ask your plans?"

"I'm going to turn you over to my superior officers," Shane said. "The letter from Atlantis Lee will be properly considered, no doubt." He reflected. "Are you willing to run the machine?"

He didn't trust Clayton, but the *Friendship* was on the bottom of the sea. One glance at the complicated control console made him realize that he couldn't hope to operate the machine without instruction.

That seemed the only way to get ashore alive. Besides, it would be a sort of test for the truth of Clayton's story. If the Outsider proved willing to pilot the *Friendship* peacefully into the hands of the Guard, it would show that he really wanted water to save perishing cities.

"Sure," Clayton agreed. "And thanks, old man."

He held up the manacles to be unlocked.

"Better keep them," Shane told him. "I think you can manage."

He unlocked the ankle chain and followed Clayton into the cramped little room. He set the discharge tube of the paralysis gun against the back of Clayton's head.

"I practiced with this," he warned.

Clayton's lean, tanned hands were swiftly busy.

"I don't blame you for doing your duty, Lieutenant," he said. "I was suspicious of you, at first, though not suspicious enough." His laughter rang out lightly. "Strangers—from strange countries—are apt to be suspicious, at first."

VI

One Against the Black Star

MOTORS hummed and pumps began to throb. The *Friendship* heaved above the surface of the sea.

Metal shutters rose, to uncover wide observation ports. The ion-blasts made a thin, doleful howling.

"Your atmosphere," Clayton explained. "It's always silent Outside."

"Are the motors good for a couple of thousand miles?" Shane asked.

"In three hours," Clayton said. "Two, Outside."

It was better to take the craft directly to General Whitehall, Shane decided. Clayton was a little too clever, a little too dangerous, to be turned over to Captain Steadman at Key West. He was aware of a glowing admiration for the Outsider's quick skill at the machine's controls and for his iron, smiling self-confidence. He couldn't trust Clayton, yet somehow he liked the man.

With the ion-rockets howling wierdly, the *Friendship* plunged ahead with rapidly mounting speed. Between wings of spray, she bounded like a rising seaplane. She left the blue tropical water and sloped sharply upward.

Behind Clayton, Shane watched alertly. He was ready for the Outsider to snatch another weapon from a hidden drawer, perhaps to tip the machine into a suicidal plunge back toward the sea, or swing it away toward the Outside.

But Clayton did none of those things. He followed the course that Shane gave him. The *Friendship* climbed through the stratosphere. The howling of the rockets died and the air grew dark as the sky Outside.

Clayton's hard brown face looked friendly. Settled in his big metal seat at the controls, he made casual comments on the machine's operation. If Clayton were honestly peaceful, Barry Shane thought, it ought to be possible for him to go back with the tall adventurer on a visit to New Britain. Perhaps he could go Outside!

Now they were so high that the convexity of America was visible.

Veiled under the gray haze of atmosphere, the familiar line of the coast drifted back beneath them. They crossed the flattened green mountains of the Atlantic Corporation. Clayton spread out a chart and Shane pointed out the location of the Ring Guard Headquarters. He saw a little red dot where the Ring Cylinder was.

"That is the mathematical center of the Ring," Clayton commented. "I suppose the Ring Cylinder is located there."

Deliberately the *Friendship* slanted down. The gray haze of air dissolved. Straight ahead, surrounded with golden fields of unharvested wheat, Shane saw the dark, armored bulk of the Ring Cylinder. Ring City made a pattern of roads and squares above it, and the landing field at Headquarters was a dark rectangle.

"There's Headquarters," he said. "Turn."

"Thank you, Shane."

Clayton's hard, short laugh had a mocking ring. He touched the controls and the howl of the rockets became a demonic shriek. Savage acceleration hurled the *Friendship* into a terrific power-dive.

THE big metal chair was designed to protect the pilot from such acceleration, but Shane was hurled back against the bulkhead by the unexpected thrust. His elbow struck the metal wall and the gun snapped out of his hand. He was pinned there by a ruthless pressure.

A square black box dropped in front of Clayton's head, where it lay against the back of the seat. He peered into hooded eye-pieces. With a stunned realization, Shane knew that the black box must be a bomb-sight.

Clayton was dive-bombing the Ring Cylinder.

Darkness hovered over Barry Shane as his thudding heart labored to pump his blood against that mer-

ciless pressure. But he clung to his consciousness with a grim and desperate tenacity. He knew what destruction of the Ring Cylinder would mean.

The instant that amazing invisible wall of ultra-electronic vibration would cease to exist, the pent-up waters about America would flow down into the dry sea-beds. Even more cataclysmic, the imprisoned atmosphere would expand, creating the most terrific explosion the planet had ever seen. Nothing living, no work of man in all America, could stand against that unimaginable blast.

When it was all ended, there would be a few salt lakes in the old ocean deeps. There would be a breath of thin, useless atmosphere above them. Perhaps the cities of the Outside, under their armored domes, would not be injured. The flood might even bring them the water that they needed. But America would be forever dead.

The enormity of the plot, to Shane, was more stunning than the shock of the steel bulkhead against his skull. How could any man, with any motive possible, attempt to murder sixty million people with a single act?

But Captain Glenn Clayton was an incredible man. Easy and mocking, his hard voice rang back to Shane.

"A power-dive, Lieutenant, is no time to interrupt your pilot."

Perhaps that was true. If the bombs shattered the ultradyne tube in the Cylinder, the grimly named *Friendship* might survive. In a matter of seconds Shane might be the only American living, and a successful attack on Clayton would probably result in death for both of them. But America might live!

Clayton was an incredible man—to think death would matter.

For one horrible instant it seemed to Shane that there was nothing he could do. He couldn't reach Clayton

against that savage pressure. There was no time for him to scramble for the dropped weapon. His groping fingers had already closed automatically on the heavy little platinum case that he had taken from Clayton, but the back of the tall seat protected the Outsider against anything thrown from behind.

With desperate, shoulder-wrenching force, Shane threw the platinum case. The same ruthless acceleration that pinned him to the bulkhead could be turned against Clayton!

Curiously deliberate, the white metal oblong flew past Clayton, into the nose of the power-diving rocket. For an instant it hung poised. Then that terrific thrust flung it back into Clayton's face.

The shriek of the rockets increased again. A shocking apprehension struck Shane. Perhaps he had failed after all. Even if he had stopped Clayton from releasing his bombs, the entire machine might plunge on to strike the Cylinder, like one tremendous rocket torpedo.

Blackness dropped again.

Once more Shane clung grimly to awareness. In a moment he knew that the *Friendship* was coming out of the dive under automatic controls. Clayton was slumped sideways in the big seat, one side of his face red with blood.

The platinum boomerang had returned with even more force beneath that terrific acceleration than Shane had expected. Clayton was knocked out again.

Relieved of that mighty pressure, Shane dragged the unconscious man out of the chair, dumped him on the floor, and took his place at the controls. For three hours he had watched Clayton navigate the ship. His first efforts resulted in two or three alarming spins, but he found that the automatic pilot would always bring him back into level flight, if he merely took his hands off the controls.

AFTER three preliminary circles, he brought the *Friendship* down on the long field between the Academy quadrangle and the old, low concrete buildings that housed the Ring Guard Headquarters. He hadn't known how to lower the landing struts. Checked with a sudden full burst of the braking rockets, the ship dropped like a falling meteor.

Shane was jarred considerably but discovered that none of his bones were broken. The *Friendship* evidently was built to take it. He opened the air-valve in the side and dragged Clayton out into the crater the rockets had torn in the ground.

The ship actually resembled a fallen meteor. The metal plates that disguised it were shaped and painted to imitate the ragged contours of a great boulder. Only the open door and projecting rocket-muzzles and the caterpillar tracks betrayed the illusion.

A silent electric car came across the field from headquarters. Slight, spry, white-haired General Whitehall got out with a little group of officers. They looked at Shane in blank astonishment.

"But it isn't a meteor!" an aide stammered inanely.

General Whitehall was first to recover.

"Congratulations, Lieutenant." His shrewd blue eyes were bright with comprehension. "So there was a stone that moved! Please forgive the skepticism of your superiors. Are you able to make a report at once?"

"I'll try, sir." Shane fought to keep his feet. The landing must have been more violent than he had realized. "I believe this is the same object I saw approaching the Ring from Outside in Sector Forty-one-B."

After he stubbornly completed his report, an ambulance took him and Captain Clayton to the headquarters

hospital where he was treated for cuts and bruises. Clayton, suffering from concussion, failed to regain complete consciousness until the following day.

General Whitehall was still at the *Friendship* when Shane returned to the disguised war-machine from Outside. Ring Guard engineers were already arriving, at his orders, to examine it.

"There are a good many things about the ship that need study, sir," Shane told the silver-headed commander. "A device called a polarizer enables it to fly through the Ring. Clayton said he didn't understand it. Then there are the ion-blast rockets and the gold-film storage cells."

"The engineers have orders to photograph and study every single part of the machine and its equipment," Whitehall assured him. "But I imagine that your prisoner himself will be our most valuable source of information."

"I doubt that, sir," Shane said. "Captain Clayton is a remarkable man. I believe he would die under torture rather than reveal one fact that he didn't want to reveal. And I think he is clever enough so that we can't believe anything he tells us until it is proved."

"Anyhow, you will question him, Shane."

"Yes, sir."

NEXT DAY, in a pleasant little room in the small white building of the Guard hospital, Barry Shane tried to question the man he had captured. The windows of unbreakable vitroid needed no bars, so Shane had the guards wait outside.

Clayton sat up in bed, his brown face smiling under the bandages. The room was quiet. On the surface it was a casual scene, but Clayton's hard greenish eyes betrayed a mocking defiance.

"Congratulations, Shane!" Clayton said in a crisp voice. "How did

you do it?"

When Shane told him, he grinned.

"Clayton, I can't understand you." Shane sat down in a chair by the bed. "You're brave. You're intelligent. I like you—"

"Thanks, Lieutenant." Under the bandages Clayton grinned again. "I can say the same about you."

"But I can't understand you," Shane repeated soberly. "Yesterday you attempted to murder America, to kill sixty million men, women, and children—the large majority, I think, of the human race left on the planet. How could you do a thing like that? Why?"

Clayton's short laugh rang hard.

"Of course you can't understand. No American could. But some of us can Outside. The Black Star has understood for two hundred years. I told you that some of us resented being shut out of the Ring."

"I explained that you had no reason to."

Clayton's eyes were hard as malachite.

"I rejected your explanation."

Shane tried another angle.

"What has the Black Star—this secret party in New Britain—got to do with your presence in America?"

"There are some things I'll tell you," Clayton said completely self-possessed. "Some things I won't. I refuse to answer any more questions about the Black Star."

Shane questioned him for two hours. The results were not satisfactory. Clayton's answers were mockingly evasive.

Late that night, in General Whitehall's office in the gray old headquarters building, he reported his failure. Worry shadowed the old general's shrewd blue eyes.

"He must talk, Shane! We don't know the real reason for his attempt to dive-bomb the Ring Cylinder. We don't know how many enemies America has Outside, or when they are planning to strike, or what un-

expected weapons they may use. We've got to have that information to save America."

Shane shook his head. "I don't think we'll get much dependable information out of Clayton." He hesitated, then blurted hurriedly. "But I've been thinking, sir. I believe we'll have to use the Outsider's own methods. I've got a plan."

Whitehall's shrewd eyes brightened. "What is it?"

"We must send a man Outside, sir."

Shane thought that the keen blue eyes were looking through his head to the very back of his mind. For a long second Whitehall studied him. A sober little twinkle came at last into the deep-set eyes.

"And you want to be the one to go?"

Shane caught his breath and swallowed again.

"Yes, sir, if you will just listen to my plan. It's the only way I see to get the information that America needs." His voice grew husky with excitement. "I want to go Outside, sir—back to New Britain—in Clayton's place!"

VII

Double for Danger

SITTING behind the rigidly military order of his desk in the room at headquarters, General Whitehall frowned, shook his white head, and began to make objections.

"You mean you want to masquerade as Clayton? It would be suicide, for a dozen reasons. In the first place, you don't even look like Clayton."

Shane leaned anxiously over the desk.

"I'm almost exactly the same height," he urged. "We can send for

Dr. Rand and have her do another plastic operation. She can rebuild my face into a duplicate of Clayton's. I'll study his voice and mannerisms."

"That might be done," Whitehall admitted. His keen blue eyes twinkled again, this time with approval. "But we know almost nothing about New Britain and Clayton's life there, and he doesn't seem inclined to supply information. Remember, the Outsiders have been isolated for two hundred years. Language and customs change, especially under such sharply different conditions as must exist Outside. Their vocabulary probably contains thousands of new words. It probably took Clayton a long time to master our English."

"But we can use his own methods," Shane insisted. "I've just been down at the shops, talking to the engineers at work on the *Friendship*. That's where the idea came to me. They've found some more of Clayton's metal foil notes. There are maps that show the cities of New Britain. A few personal letters. Rolls of foil, printed in microscopic type, that seem to correspond with our magazines and newspapers. I can acquire a fair vocabulary by studying them."

"Pronunciation will be different," Whitehall objected.

"I can use the radio," Shane said, "after I get near enough to New Britain to pick up anything. The lack of a Heaviside layer cuts down the range of radio Outside. Perhaps I can pretend to be injured or exhausted, after I get there, to gain a little more time."

The general nodded slowly. "I see you've thought this out, Shane. Maybe you have something." Another argument made him shake his head. "But you would have to take the *Friendship*. That's too valuable to give back to the Outsiders, at least until our engineers have had time to complete their study of it."

"I realize that, sir," Shane's gray

eyes lit with hope. He felt he was about to win his point. "I won't need to take the *Friendship*. The engineers have found escape equipment, stored in a compartment by the air-valve. Evidently it was intended for Clayton to use in case anything went wrong with the *Friendship* itself. That discovery was the beginning of my whole plan, sir."

Whitehall's keen features began to reflect Shane's eagerness.

"What sort of equipment?" he asked.

"An air-suit," Shane said. "It doesn't look comfortable, but it's fitted to keep a man alive for days Outside. And there's a light electric motorcycle, powered with gold-film cells. The helmet of the suit had a two-way radio."

The victory was almost won. Shane caught his breath and confidently drove on.

"You see, I can use the radio to get in touch with them. I'll report that the *Friendship* was destroyed—by a weapon that is waiting for any other Outsiders that happen to come along!"

GENERAL WHITEHALL rose abruptly. "That's possible." He tried to control his enthusiasm. "You can report that you were captured by the Guard and set free to take back a message. We'll send a reply to that letter from the Secretary of New Britain, offering them the water they need, by peaceful exchange."

Then another obstacle checked the old general's mounting enthusiasm.

"But how will you get Outside," he queried, "if you don't take the *Friendship*?"

"I discussed that with the engineers. They have identified the polarizer units aboard the *Friendship* and have already learned a good deal about them. Apparently, they tell me, the units create an intense spe-

cial field on the same ultra-electronic level as the vibration of the Ring itself. Atoms in this special field are polarized, their axes rotate into alignment with the radial axis of the ring.

"The effect is probably quite temporary, but polarized matter evidently passes through the Ring just as light does, without making any ruptures in it. The engineers say they can dismount one of the units from the *Friendship* and use it to put me through the Ring, with the air-suit and the motorcycle, whenever I'm ready to go."

"I see." Whitehall nodded. "But how will you get back?"

Shane grinned. "That's a bridge to be crossed when I get to it. It's easy to get out of the Ring at sea level, but not so easy to get back against fifteen pounds of air pressure. There are ways, though. I could make a report from Outside by radio. By that time the engineers probably will have finished their study of the *Friendship* and have her ready for operation. They might fly the machine Outside to pick me up.

"Also, it will be possible to duplicate the polarizers. A special airlock could be built, extending through the Ring, with a polarizer inside. That would make it possible to come and go at will. But we've no time to wait for such things now." Urgently Shane's voice dropped. "Please, sir, what do you think?"

Soberly the old general smiled. "You seem to have answers for all my arguments. The matter will have to be discussed with my staff, but I suppose we'll have to let you go."

"Thank you, sir!" whispered Shane.

Dr. Della Rand arrived next day from Chicago Corporation in answer to General Whitehall's urgent call. At the monorail station in sleepy little Ring City, Shane was waiting to meet her. His breath came a little faster as the huge silver teardrop

of the car paused above the station tower. The famous doctor stepped out of the elevator, and his heart skipped a beat.

Her dark, vital beauty was arresting as ever. Her skin had the same warm glow, her eyes the same penetrating quickness, but something had changed. Shane felt a pang of vague loss. Then he knew what the trouble was.

Della Rand hadn't changed at all, but he had seen the picture Clayton carried of that violet-eyed girl of far-off New Britain, who bore the haunting name of Atlantis Lee.

"Hello, Shane."

Even her throaty, efficient voice hadn't changed. Her dark, alert eyes studied his face, yet he knew she saw only the deft work of her surgeon's hands.

"General Whitehall sent for me," she stated. "What does he want?"

Shane could talk to her now. He wasn't afraid of her. He didn't flush or stammer, because she didn't really matter any longer.

"A military secret," he said. "I need another facial operation."

Her dark eyes widened. "What's the matter with you now?"

HE TOLD her about the plan and the situation that made it necessary. Her quick mind accepted and digested the fact that men lived Outside. She studied Shane again, as if she had never really seen him before. In a lower, different voice she asked:

"Isn't this scheme of yours very dangerous?"

"Nothing is too dangerous now," Shane said.

They talked to General Whitehall in the headquarters office.

"Clayton mustn't know what we're planning," explained the slight old commander. "We're going to make recordings of his speech and study his unconscious mannerisms. He's clever enough to trick us

if he knew, but his face was cut when Lieutenant Shane captured him. The injury hasn't been properly repaired. I'll arrange for you to make an operation on him at once. That will give you an opportunity to study his face."

"Also," suggested the woman doctor, "I believe we should make some psychological tests. That is another specialty of mine. I was led into it through a study of the psychology of facial expression."

Shane was present in the hospital operating room when Clayton first saw Della Rand. The prisoner's greenish eyes lit with an instant admiration.

"You are going to complicate my task, Doctor," Clayton grinned. "I came here to make war on America. Now I see that I'll have to save your life and take you back with me to New Britain."

Della Rand caught her breath. It was the first time that Shane had ever seen her air of curt efficiency disturbed. He thought she was pleased as well as flustered. To a woman, he supposed, Clayton must seem daring and romantic. In a moment, however, she got back her professional briskness.

"All right," she said curtly. "Let's see your face."

Shane watched the operation. The delicate instruments of bright steel seemed to live in her deft hands. Newly developed adhesive joined the tissue of nerve and muscle and skin, so that no stitches were required. When she had finished, only a tiny line showed where Shane's acceleration-hurled missile had cut its long slash. Even that would slowly vanish.

Next morning, back in his own room at the hospital, Shane confronted the tall Outsider.

"Now we'll have to take you to a cell in the Guard prison, unless you want to give your parole and stay here. You will still be under guard,

of course, but you will be more comfortable."

"Sure," Clayton said promptly.

"Then you give your word not to attempt escape?"

For a split-second Clayton seemed to hesitate. Shane thought his greenish eyes flashed, as if with some concealed reckless amusement.

"I do," he said.

IN THE days that followed, Clayton proved ready enough to talk to Shane, so long as they kept off certain topics, such as the Black Star. He also insisted on the right to ask as many questions as he answered. Every moment, Shane could see, he was devouring every possible fact about the science, geography and defenses of America. Shane was haunted with a fear that he would escape, in spite of his parole and the guards about the little white hospital, to make some new attack on the Ring Cylinder.

Shane explained that fear to General Whitehall. The commander admitted the danger. Twenty men of the now enlarged Ring Guard were assigned to the duty of preventing the Outsider's escape.

Clayton's laugh was a mocking challenge when Shane told him that Della Rand was planning some psychological tests.

"Let her go ahead," he invited sardonically. "I'll find out as much as she does. Besides, the tests should be amusing. Della is really too charming to die in America, Lieutenant. I'm going to take her home."

"If that's a joke," Shane retorted, "it isn't funny. What about Atlantis Lee?"

"Atlantis," Clayton said, "is a long way from the Midwest Corporation."

Shane spent many hours with the engineers aboard the *Friendship*. He learned to operate every mechanism and studied every detail of design, material and construction. He

memorized every word on the metal foil rolls and letters, every line on the maps.

Shane was never sure just when Clayton perceived the plan. When the guards let him into the hospital room on the morning that Della was to begin the operations on his face, he asked Clayton for the massive platinum ring.

"I'd like to keep it," Clayton protested, covering the heavy bezel of plain white metal which didn't even carry a monogram. "It has sentimental value."

"I can't picture you as sentimental," Shane snapped. "Give me the ring."

Grinning, Clayton slipped it off and tossed it to him.

"I was wondering whether you would think of it," he said. "Not that it will help you much." A cold note of warning came into his voice. "You're a fool to try this, Shane! To get an idea of your chances, just reverse the situation. Suppose that I had managed to turn up in your place on my first visit to America."

"Think of all the people I would have had to deceive—your friends, your relatives, your fellow-Guardsmen. Surely, not knowing anything at all about them, I would have made one false step. And one, remember, can be enough to result in the death of a spy."

His hard, challenging green eyes mocked Shane.

"Maybe Della can give you a copy of my face," he continued. "But the scars will be visible to one who knows how to look. I'm a quarter of an inch taller. My eyes and my voice and my hair are different. You may forget one of my habits, which you've been studying so carefully, and betray yourself with some little trick of your own."

"Remember, Shane, life is hard Outside. It's easy to keep alive in America. A naked animal can do it. But it takes a lot of skill and a lot

of equipment to keep alive Outside." He gave a hard little laugh. "Don't you see that you're a fool?"

"Thanks for the hints," Shane grinned at him. "But just keep the situation reversed. Suppose that you were in my place, wouldn't you take all those risks willingly for your own people?"

Clayton's lean face grew visibly warmer. In that moment Shane liked and admired the tall Outsider more than he had before.

"Sure I would."

Then the guards and nurses came to take them to the operating room.

VIII

The Gentle Death

DELLA RAND herself, in Shane's quiet room at the hospital, removed his bandages. Her dark, close-shingled head made a curt little nod of professional satisfaction. Standing behind her, General Whitehall pursed his thin, wrinkled lips in a silent whistle of astonishment. Della gave Shane a mirror.

He gasped, unable to believe what he saw. It was uncanny. It made shivery, cold feet run up and down his spine. He felt just the same, except that his new face was still stiff and painful. But the hard, handsome features that looked at him from the mirror were those of Captain Glenn Clayton!

His dark hair had been bleached and dyed to the bronze of Clayton's. The magic of biochemistry had changed his skin to Clayton's ruddy brown. His gray eyes, from the delicate injection of special dyes, had taken on the greenish glint of Clayton's.

"I can't believe it!"

Even his voice startled him. Clever surgery on his larynx and sinuses

had given it the quality of Clayton's. He looked down at his hands. They also had felt Della's knife, but the tips of his opposite thumbs and fingers were set together in a characteristic habit that was his own.

"That isn't Clayton," General Whitehall warned him. "Don't ever forget that one little gesture. Even a tiny thing like that might destroy you and the hopes of America."

The day he was to leave, Shane couldn't resist the temptation to visit Clayton's guarded room. He was wearing Clayton's tight gray trousers and tunic, to get used to them, with the paralysis gun at his hip. It surprised him to find Della Rand there, at a little table scattered with her test equipment.

Clayton, seated across from Della with his palms resting on two electrodes, stared up at Shane. For a moment he looked blank with astonishment. Then his handsome face broke into a smile of admiration.

"Splendid, Shane!" he cried—in the voice that was now identical with Shane's own. "Thanks for letting me see." His green taunting eyes looked back at Della. "Your gadget must have registered something then, beautiful."

"Surprise," said Della's curt voice. "Point-o-sixteen."

Clayton's bold brown face turned back to Shane.

"She thinks she's learning things from me." His hard voice had a malicious ring. "But I don't need a laboratory to tell that she already registers about point-o-sixty degrees of love."

Della's face glowed with color.

"Stop it," she ordered curtly, "or I'll call the guard."

Yet Shane wondered if Clayton hadn't told the truth. Clayton grinned at him.

"Splendid, Shane," he repeated mockingly. "You look exactly like me—to anybody who doesn't know me. There are a thousand things that

can betray an impersonator in a world that he has never seen before. Perhaps you have thought of a hundred of them. There are nine-hundred more."

Shane waved in farewell and went out of the room. That was the moment Clayton had selected to break his parole. Now that Barry Shane looked exactly like him, he also looked exactly like Barry Shane. It would have been foolish not to make some use of such a convenient fact. He, too, had been observing mannerisms and voice inflections. He had planned a desperate masquerade of his own.

When Shane went out, Clayton was left alone with Della Rand. That had been easy to manage, for he was on parole. All the doctor's reaction tests had not revealed his plan, though he had encouraged her to go on by yielding a few unimportant bits of information about New Britain. He simply refused to cooperate when any guards were present.

EIGHTY seconds after Shane departed, Clayton followed. Della Rand was left lying across the bed. She was unconscious from an anesthetic needle in her own kit, her mouth and wrists were turning blue from the pressure of Clayton's hands.

Clayton had flung off the bathrobe he had worn. He had torn his underclothing and mussed his hair. Della had scratched his face, injuring her own deft handiwork. But even that helped his planned effect.

In the hall outside, he met the startled guard.

"Where is he?" His breathless, gasping tones were a splendid imitation of Shane's altered voice. "He overpowered me—took my clothes and gun. He looks like me now—where's Clayton?"

The guard blinked and gulped and automatically pointed.

"Lieutenant Shane—I thought he was Shane—just went that way."

"Fool, that was Clayton!" Clayton's voice cracked like an angry whip at the confused guard. "He's getting away. He's desperate. Spread the alarm! Here, give me your gun!"

"Yes, sir," croaked the dazed guard.

It was a simple plan, one that had the audacious simplicity that was the spice of life to Clayton. Clutching the gun, he grinned as he sprinted down the twisting corridor in the direction the guard had pointed.

It was neat. Shane would be buried, if nothing went wrong, as the Outsider killed while attempting escape. Clayton himself, calmly carrying out his own masquerade, would be escorted to the Ring and safely through it, by the very men assigned to the duty of guarding him. The first intimation of the truth would be the unexpected descent of a Black Star rocket-bomber fleet on the Ring Cylinder.

Of course, there were a good many things that could go wrong, but Clayton was used to risks and he enjoyed them. This attempt, he thought, was no more desperate than Shane's plan.

There was only one phase of the affair that Clayton regretted. He wished it had been possible to take Della Rand with him. He had admired her from the beginning, but he had never quite realized how much he really wanted her until those brief, delicious seconds when her lithe, slender body struggled in his arms, before the anesthetic took effect.

He turned a corner and saw Shane ahead of him. Clayton flung up the heavy pistol he had snatched from the bewildered guard. It was a more deadly thing than the paralysis gun Shane had taken from him. The sights crossed the back of Shane's head, but the gun shivered in Clayton's hand, and he did not pull the trigger.

Shane wore his own clothing. Shane was walking with his own jaunty stride. That bronze head was his own. The man ahead was himself.

Clayton thrust away that brief, uncanny feeling. He tried to forget a sudden, unwilling liking for the quiet-voiced Guardsman. Emotions didn't matter now. The long-planned, final victory of the Black Star was in sight.

He steadied the gun. But Shane had swung on down the hall, and Clayton saw the long mirror at the end of it. At the same instant Shane saw the crouching image of his nearly naked double, tense in the very act of firing.

Clayton's bullet broke the mirror, but Shane had flung himself aside. There was no time to turn and aim, yet his lightning reaction served him. Before the mirror shattered, he had discharged the paralysis gun at it, toward the image of his double.

The thin beam of dull violet was reflected back to the Outsider. His gun-arm dropped, suddenly numbed. The borrowed weapon clattered on the floor.

Even then, disarmed, Clayton clung to his story. At Shane's suggestion, the swiftly gathering guards held them both. General Whitehall arrived. Della Rand, recovered from the anesthetic needle, gave her account of the affair. They were judges that Clayton could not deceive.

Shane went on, to undertake his adventure Outside.

HANDCUFFS were snapped on Clayton and he was escorted back to his room. Della Rand's reaction test equipment had been removed. The room was stripped bare as a cell. He spent the rest of the day in the company of six guards.

Next morning, slight, shrewd-eyed old General Whitehall came in the room to see him. His thin face was sober, his voice low with regret.

"Clayton," he said gravely, "you've broken your parole."

Chains jingled cheerfully as Clayton sat up on the bare mattress in the corner. Red and welled where Della had scratched it, his hard, grinning face looked faintly sinister.

"So I have," he agreed.

"You're a riddle to me, Clayton." The old Guardsman shook his head wearily. "I like you personally. Yet, after what you did yesterday, we can't overlook the fact that you are a ruthless and clever enemy."

"No, General." Clayton's voice had a bitter ring. "You can't understand me. But if you had lived Outside—if your forefathers had, for two hundred years—you could. If you had seen human beings dying for want of the oxygen in a cup of water, when you knew there were oceans of it lying inside the Barrier, then you could understand."

"But," protested Whitehall, "we're willing to give you water."

"Perhaps you are now, to save a little for yourselves," Clayton retorted. "But you failed to do it two hundred years ago. America should congratulate herself, General, on two centuries of borrowed time—of stolen life!"

Whitehall's face went stern. "That attitude is unfortunate," he said, "both for America and New Britain. But it exists and must be dealt with." Cold now, his shrewd eyes studied Clayton. "Captain, we are prepared to offer you two alternatives."

"Only two?" Clayton's smooth voice mocked.

"There is still time to change your attitude," Whitehall stated. "You can answer our questions honestly. You can co-operate squarely with our efforts to establish friendly relations and peaceful trade with New Britain."

Clayton grinned. "The other alternative?"

[Turn page]

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"Euthanasia," Whitehall answered soberly.

Puzzled for a moment, Clayton's green eyes glinted with understanding.

"Oh," he said softly. "The easy death—your polite and scientific name for murder."

"If you prefer to call it that. You attempted to destroy the Ring Cylinder. Yesterday you tried to kill Lieutenant Shane. Frankly, Captain, I regret this very deeply, but we feel that you are too dangerous to America to be allowed to live to endanger us."

Clayton's face lit with a reckless amusement.

"Your regrets are unnecessary. I assure you that in your place I should take the same action, with no regrets at all. You Americans are better men than I thought."

Whitehall stood silent. In a husky voice, hardly above a whisper, he said, "You're a strange man, Clayton. This is more painful to me than you can understand. Our surgeon will be ordered to prepare for the operation at once. I assure you there will be no pain."

"Thank you, General," Clayton said, "though that is not important."

He allowed himself a wolfish grin. Who, he wondered, would the surgeon be?

"You almost make me think you're really Clayton, carrying out his little plot, after all!" His voice suddenly went grave. "This is a mad adventure, Shane, but you can't fail. It's too important."

When Shane grinned, it was Clayton's own hard grin.

"I'll do my best," he promised. "I was just talking to the engineers about our imaginary weapon. They suggest a decoherer—a beam of force that appears to destroy the molecular cohesion of metal so that good steel crumbles to useless dust. Actually, sir, is there any possibility of such a weapon?"

Wearily Whitehall shook his shaggy head.

"None, I'm afraid. The defenses of America had been neglected for two hundred years. We have depended on the Ring. We don't even have the machine-tools and trained men to create the sort of armament that America had two hundred years ago. Of course, we're trying desperately to get ready for trouble. We're enlisting men in the Guard. Our few arsenals are working day and night, trying to arm them."

His blue eyes were bleak with dread.

"But we've no protection at all from bombing raids on our cities, or the Ring Cylinder itself from such rocket-bombers as the *Friendship*. That's why your mission is so vitally important."

A special monorail car, sighing along at four miles a minute over the high steel thread, took Shane to Key West. Two Guard engineers accompanied him, carrying one of the polarizer units that had been taken from the *Friendship*.

That night a Guard amphibian took them from the base to a low, barren coral islet that lay half in the Ring and half Outside. Shane shook hands with the engineers, then seated himself in the clumsy bulk of the air-suit. Awkward in it, he

IX

Beyond the Ring

GENERAL WHITEHALL shook hands with Barry Shane before the young Guardsman started for the Ring. Bright with a fresh amazement, his keen blue eyes studied the face, the posture and the odd gray clothing that had been Clayton's own.

mounted the silent electric bicycle and tried it out on the hard beach within the Ring.

Swiftly the engineers set up the compact polarizer. They anchored it with long steel spikes driven into the coral and ran wires to the controls, a hundred feet back from the Ring. One of them leaned the motorcycle against the Ring's invisible wall, above the polarizer. He stepped back and called out, "Okay, Joe!"

Something slapped the motorcycle through the Ring.

"Okay, Lieutenant," said the engineer. "Your turn."

CLUMSILY Shane walked across the coral sand. He pressed his armored body flat against the invisible barrier of vibration. Waiting there while the engineers fumbled with something, he had to fight a momentary panic.

Science had given him Clayton's face and Clayton's voice. He had tried to learn how Clayton talked, how he behaved, and even how he thought. Still he wasn't Clayton. One tiny blunder might destroy both him and America.

"Luck, Lieutenant!"

He was glad to hear that brisk voice, because it broke his dread. He moved his hand in a silent signal. Something clicked, a little tube glowed blue and the Ring didn't exist. Air pressure, like a mighty hand, flung him forward—Outside!

Dazedly Shane got back his breath in the heavy helmet and stumbled to his feet. He shuffled toward the dark forms of the engineers, but the Ring had come back, and he collided with its unseen wall.

The engineers moved, and he knew they were speaking, yet no sound came through. For a moment he was conscious of a painful loneliness. With the dials on the chest of the suit, he snapped on the radio. A blare of American music lifted his spirits.

He resisted an impulse to call Key West Base. He knew from Clayton's maps that the Outsiders had established outposts of some sort within a few hundred miles of the Ring. It was one of them, designated on the maps as "Point Fourteen," that he hoped to reach. Possibly, too, patrol rockets would be sent even closer to the Ring under cover of night, for the Outsiders by now might be wondering why Clayton hadn't returned. There was danger that any report might be overheard.

He set up the motorcycle and mounted it stiffly. With a last wave to the engineers, he turned down the first barren slope of the abyss that once the sea had filled. Now he was on his own.

The low coral islet became a dark, looming hill behind him, and the two men there were lost. The atmosphere under the Ring made a misty blur against the sky, but the stars that filled the black heavens of the Outside burned with a cruel, naked splendor.

The electric vehicle ran without sound, for there was no air to carry vibration. Its headlight made a tiny, defiant glow against the overwhelming dark. Under the synthetic rubber tires, age-dried weed crumbled to noiseless dust. Empty seashells went soundlessly to powder.

The silent wheels jolted over grotesque arms of dead coral, down and down into the chasms that once the sea had filled. Shane inched up the speed and began to take chances on the bumps.

Elation mounted in him. This was the dream of his childhood. He had always dreamed of going Outside, to explore the bottom of the empty oceans and plumb all the mysteries of his wondering youth.

His heart began to pound. He crouched lower in the saddle of the jolting motorcycle, and his thick gloves tightened on the handlebars. He jumped a black pit in the dry sea-

floor and careened around a boulder. He piled up in the next hole.

Drunkenly he struggled to his feet. He felt hot, fevered. Suddenly he knew what was wrong. He was breathing so much oxygen he was intoxicated with it.

HE ADJUSTED the valves and sanity came back to him. Once more he perceived the sobering perils ahead. He closed the valves a little farther. A few pounds of oxygen might be the price of life before he reached Point Fourteen.

He set up the motorcycle. Except for a few bent spokes in the front wheel, it seemed uninjured. He mounted again and rode on down, more slowly now, into the sea's empty chasm.

The air-suit, with its burden of oxygen tanks and equipment, was already heavy and irksome. It was ingenious enough. A tiny chemical unit with gold-film power, returned drinking water, glucose, and fresh oxygen from the moisture and carbon dioxide in the exhaled air. The inside pockets held equipment and packets of concentrated food. He could slip his arms out of the heavy sleeves to reach them.

There was even a waste-disposal valve. But no ingenuity could have made the thing really comfortable for so long a march as this.

Presently the sun came up. With almost the violence of physical shock, frigid night became blinding day. Through the transparent face-plate, the sun struck with a savage, blistering force. Despite its reflecting silver plate, the suit became uncomfortably hot, yet every ink-black shadow among the rocks retained a well of bitter cold.

All that glaring day he went on, with only a few brief pauses for rest, then all the following night. The oxygen and the gold-film cells would last only a few weeks. He had to reach Point Fourteen soon.

Long since, the misty blur of the Ring had been lost behind him. He pushed the jolting, silent vehicle across the dry mud flats and dead, dark hills, down into the vast desolation of the vanished Atlantic.

It was just before dawn of the second day when the damaged front wheel abruptly collapsed. Thrown from the wrecked machine, he pitched down a rocky slope. He had to move hastily to slap an emergency patch over a hole that a broken spoke had torn in the thick fabric of his suit.

Shaken and breathless, he fumbled uselessly with the wreckage, though the first glance told him that repairs were out of the question. At last, he reluctantly left it and plodded on.

Thereafter, he lost his count of the days. He lived and struggled from moment to moment. He had a job to do and he was trying to do it. It didn't matter greatly whether it was day or night. The sky was always dark. No matter how strange the wastes of age-baked, black-fissured sea-mud about him, or how wild the crags of uneroded mountains, he couldn't get lost.

He knew the direction of Point Fourteen. Always he could find it by looking for some familiar group of stars. That was all he had to do—just follow the stars down into the empty sea. The little headlight fastened on the helmet helped to pick out his way.

It didn't matter how his body ached from effort, or how the pressure of the heavy suit chafed him, or how stale the air became, or how the numbing drunkenness of weariness begged for him to stop. There was nothing to do but go on.

He never knew how long it took him to climb that last black volcanic range, which once the sea had drowned. Rugged precipices opposed him. Sharp lava tripped him and impeded him. Recklessly he opened the valves to give himself new energy.

It was close to sunset when he came to the summit of the range. Hopefully he looked beyond the cragged pass. According to Clayton's maps, Point Fourteen ought to be in sight from here, on the crown of another range sixty miles beyond.

From his feet, the shadows fell. They made chasms of frigid midnight. Half afraid to look, he let his eyes range farther. Past the black, ragged shadow of the range lay another desert plain, vaster than any he had crossed. Another wall of stark hills broke it, mile on mile beyond.

There was no gleaming dome, no moving rocket, no work of man.

WEARILY he sat down on a rugged jut of lava. Once, sometime in the blur of the past, he had seen some rusted steel plates. They must have been part of a ship sunk long before the Dwarf tore the oceans away. But that was the only hint that men had ever been Outside before him.

A dull despair began to chill him. Would he ever find New Britain?

He began to fumble with the radio dials on the chest of the bulky suit, listening anxiously for any human voice. But his straining ears heard only the hiss and crackle of static.

The sun went down. Like a black tide of death, freezing shadows flowed up through the pass. Barry Shane shivered in the clumsy air-suit and kept fumbling with the radio dials. Slowly the roar of the sun's interference faded out around them.

An hour later, the first voice came through.

Strange in the phones, it sounded harsh and guttural and twangy. At first, he thought it was a totally foreign language. It had been repeated three times before he could distinguish the familiar English words.

"Point Fourteen, calling Rocket Avenger."

Then the reply came in. It was a garbled blur of strident gutturals, but presently he began to catch a few words.

"Patrol . . . Barrier . . . no trace . . . all night." The last phrase was clear. "Captain Barlow, contact off."

Shane listened all night to the scraps of conversation he could pick up. Whispering huskily in the big helmet, he practiced the harsh accent. It was easier to learn than he had expected. Part of the strange harshness, he thought, was probably due to the fact that the Outsiders lived and spoke under a pressure of only some four pounds of a special gas mixture that was three-quarters oxygen, instead of fifteen pounds of the twenty per cent mixture called air.

That was a fact that the engineers had learned from their study of the *Friendship*. Four pounds of internal pressure put much less strain on a sealed ship or a dome-city than fifteen. The helium and other inert gases in the mixture were less likely to cause the bends if any accident caused a change of pressure. There was no nitrogen to form deadly bubbles in the blood.

But sound conduction, in the synthetic mixture, was different.

Late the third night, Shane called for help, though he knew his accent still wasn't perfect. All his preparations had been too hurried. Clayton had spent years getting ready for his invasion of America, only to fail.

The dropping pressure in the oxygen tanks cut off Shane's time. He snapped on the tiny short-wave transmitter built into the big helmet.

"Calling Point Fourteen," he panted feebly into the mike. "Captain Clayton—of the *Friendship*—calling Point Fourteen. Calling—"

The swift reply startled him.

"Clayton, where are you?" The harsh voice seemed surprised and excited. "This is Point Fourteen. Go on, Clayton!"

Shane made his voice fainter.

"*Friendship's* lost," he gasped. "I'm in—suit, sixty miles west of—Point Fourteen. Please pick—me up." He let his feeble voice wander incoherently. "Message from America . . . can't breathe . . . power going, but I'll keep on the light. . . ."

"Hang on, Clayton," rasped the phones. "We'll send for you. I think the *Avenger* is hot."

"Hurry!" gulped Shane. "Can't breathe . . . much longer."

He kept his headlight flashing into the east. Presently the blue glare of rockets grew and sank among the stars. The ship dropped a hundred yards from him on silent ion-blasts that brushed rugged lava points with white incandescence.

The *Avenger* was larger than the *Friendship* and it carried no disguise to make it look like a harmless boulder. The sleek, tapered lines of its welded gray hull were honestly vicious and deadly.

Shane pretended to be half-conscious, though any such pretense was almost needless. He had waited almost too long to make the call. The oxygen pressure was low, and the chemical air-unit had stopped for want of power.

The glare of jutting rocket-tubes ceased, but a search light speared him blindingly. Lights flashed from the opening valve at the base of the upright ship. Portable lights bobbed toward him across the lava.

X

New Britain

MEN pulled Shane upright. Harsh voices reached him faintly, but his radio had gone dead along with the power cells. He couldn't understand the dim sounds that came through the suit. He moved to show

that he was still alive and then relaxed. They carried him through the valves of the rocket and took him out of the air-suit. It was good to breathe clean air again, but he kept his breathing slow and his eyes closed, pretending to be out.

An elevator lifted him. He was put in a bed. A savage pressure smashed him against it, and he knew the rocket was in flight again. He heard voices around him.

"Captain Clayton, can you speak?"

He had been troubled about the stubble of beard on his unshaven face and his counterpart of Clayton's narrow mustache. The biochemical treatment of his skin was intended to give his growing beard and hair the bronze color of Clayton's, at least for a few weeks. He had been worried about a possible difference in shade. Evidently, though, they were accepting him as Clayton. Either the beard was all right or else these men didn't know Clayton well.

Shane muttered something and let his eyes open bleakly. Men surrounded him. He assumed a vacant, unseeing stare, yet he managed to see a good deal. These men—officers, doubtless, of the *Avenger*—wore brown uniforms with black stars on their sleeves. Did that mean they were members of the mysterious Black Star party?

They began to hammer questions at him.

"What happened to you in America? Do you feel all right? What happened to the *Friendship*? Have the Americans any defenses besides the Barrier? Will you advise Admiral Gluck to attack?"

Shane listened and muttered unintelligibly, still practising the accent. They could think he was out of his head. Despite the impatient questions, they displayed respect. Clayton, he realized, must be fairly important.

At last the thrust of rocket-motors ceased. The ship swayed and

was still. Shane knew they had landed. He tried to gather his resources for the next test of the masquerade, deciding that it wasn't safe to pretend half-consciousness any longer. He didn't want the attention of doctors. They might too easily find the scars of his facial operations. He tried weakly to sit up in bed.

"Hello," he muttered. "So you picked me up, eh?"

He thought his accent wasn't bad and hoped that the half-intentional weakness of his voice would hide any flaws. A heavy man in brown stepped quickly to the side of the bed.

"Don't you know me, Clayton? Captain Barlow, of the *Avenger*. Seems we were just in time."

"Thanks, Barlow." Shane tried to assume Clayton's grin. "Guess I was about finished. Where are we?"

The heavy man looked puzzled.

"You must have been through torture, Clayton." He clucked sympathetically. "I can see what an effort you're making. You've got to pull yourself together. We've just come down to Point Fourteen. Admiral Gluck has signaled me to take you aboard the *Nemesis*, to report at once. Can you stand up?"

"I think so," mumbled Shane.

"Save your voice for the admiral. We'll fix you up."

BBROWN-UNIFORMED orderlies supported him into a compact bathroom. The tiny spray of water was disconcerting, until he remembered how precious water must be Outside. Doubtless it was distilled and used again and again. The shower refreshed his fatigue-drugged body and awakened him to new awareness of the many perils ahead.

The stubble on his face was only a little too dark, but he was glad of the chance to shave it off with an odd-looking razor. He left the narrow coppery mustache. The mirror cheered him, for it gave back Clay-

ton's reckless, green-eyed grin.

Barry Shane was appalled by the endless risks of this desperate game, yet this was just the sort of adventure that sharpened Clayton's enjoyment of life. It helped Shane to try to imagine that he was really the daring, hard-eyed fighting man whose face he wore.

The orderlies had laid out a brown uniform that fitted him fairly well. He transferred to its pockets the little platinum case of Clayton's and the letter from the American Corporation Control Board to Atlantis Lee.

A central elevator dropped him and Captain Barlow to the base of the rocket. Orderlies helped them into air-suits. As they entered the valve, air-pumps throbbed and the outer gate clanged open. Shane had his first glimpse of Point Fourteen. It made him shudder in the heavy suit.

It was day again. The blinding sun had come back into the dark, changeless sky, above a rugged mountain wall that marched ink-black across the east. Point Fourteen was a roughly leveled plateau, dotted with low domes of gray metal. Upon it stood a rocket fleet.

Queerly ominous, the tapered gray cylinders stood on end, supported by angular landing stanchions. They glittered under the sun and cast long, stark black shadows. They were like rows of shells in some old munitions factory, before the age of the Ring. They were like metal monuments in some fantastic graveyard of giants.

They were symbols of death—scores of rocket-bombers!

A cold hand of apprehension grasped Shane's heart. America had no weapon that could stop these evil machines from destroying the Ring Cylinder, nor could hope to find one. And this, he grimly reminded himself, was only Point Fourteen. For all he knew, there might be thirteen other rocket fleets, or thirty. In the

big helmet, he caught his breath.

He could not fail! He had to win!

An armored car was waiting at the air-lock. Shane and Barlow clambered in, and it rolled away through a sinister colonnade of rockets. It jolted heavily on rocks, but there was no sound. The silence of the Outside became queerly oppressive to Shane.

The valves of the *Nemesis* opened for them, and an elevator carried them up to the quarters of Admiral Gluck. Brown guards admitted them to a room hung with a barbaric display of weapons, ranging from curved wooden boomerangs to a duplicate of Clayton's paralysis gun.

"Well, Clayton!"

The sharp, impatient voice was oddly high, almost shrill. It came from a thin little man standing behind a desk. As he made a queer, stiff-armed salute with exaggerated mechanical precision, medals jingled on his brown breast.

Shane imitated the salute. So this was Admiral Gluck! He had shaggy iron-gray hair, bushy white brows over sharp, dark, hollow eyes, and a luxuriant yellow-stained mustache. His face was lean and stern, brown as his uniform.

"At ease, Captain." He sat down with a tinkle of medals. "Your report?"

SHANE caught his breath and tried to remember all he had learned of this harsh, guttural accent. He let his lean body sag, yielding to the real exhaustion in him. He didn't try to keep his voice from sounding weak and hoarse.

"The *Friendship* safely entered the Barrier as ordered, sir. On a small island of the Florida Corporation, I attempted to capture a member of the American defense force, which they call the Ring Guard."

Admiral Gluck's bright, sunken eyes narrowed.

"What's wrong with your voice?"

he shrilled impatiently. "I can hardly understand you."

Shane made a hoarse, apologetic little laugh.

"I'm sorry, sir. An air-suit cold." That was the diagnosis of his case that he had overheard. "And I am afraid I've been practising Americanese so long that it's natural to me."

Gluck shrugged impatiently. "Get on."

"This American destroyed the *Friendship*," Shane told him. "He used a hand weapon."

Gluck's mouth fell open, revealing yellow fangs.

"What hand weapon could destroy an armored rocket?" he blurted in amazement.

"It looked a little like a paralysis gun," Shane said. "It didn't make any beam that you could see, but the rocket crumbled. Hard steel turned to fine gray dust. I heard the weapon called a decoherer."

"Decoherer, eh?" Gluck's voice stammered. His dark face turned darker with anger. "The pampered rats think they can defy the Black Star, do they?" His tiny eyes glittered shrewdly. "How is the Barrier machine protected?"

Shane shook his bronzed head and looked solemn.

"They call it the Ring Cylinder," he said. "It is surrounded with hidden batteries of decoherers. Not hand machines, but powerful projectors that can send the beam two thousand miles, all the way to the Ring—the Barrier."

That was almost a slip. Shane felt a little tingle of dread, but Gluck hadn't noticed. He pounded on the desk with a gnarled fist.

"The Black Star will amash them yet!" he shrilled.

"Certainly it will, sir."

Gluck repeated that stiff-armed salute, and Shane responded promptly.

"Get on," the admiral urged

sharply. "How did you escape?"

"I didn't," Shane imitated Clayton's grin. He didn't feel a bit like grinning, but he knew that Glenn Clayton would have enjoyed this situation. "The Americans set me free!"

Gluck smiled grimly. "So you tricked them?"

"No, I didn't trick them," Shane said quietly. "Enough of the *Friendship* was left for them to see I had come to destroy the Barrier. But their defenses are so sure, they weren't afraid to let me go."

He let Clayton's laugh ring scornfully.

"They found the letter from Atlantis Lee and took it to their government. They don't know the Black Star," Shane attempted Clayton's most wolfish grin. "They sent me back with a message of peace!"

He showed the gray envelope addressed to Atlantis Lee.

"You know what it says?" Gluck demanded.

"The American Corporation Control Board is willing to establish friendly relations. They suggest an exchange of ambassadors. They are willing to set up a joint commission to discuss exchanging water for our oil, metals and power cells."

"Fat fools!" shrieked Gluck viciously.

"They don't know the Black Star!" Shane grinned, hoping that his hard brown face didn't show any of his alarmed bewilderment about what the Black Star really was. He offered the envelope. "Do you want it, sir?"

"Deliver it," Gluck snapped impatiently. "Let your pretty friend play our game. Perhaps we should send an ambassador—to find a way for our bombers through these blasted d-decoherers."

"Yes, sir," Shane said. "Your orders, sir?"

*Gluck's keen little eyes gave him a startled, stabbing look. Shane

knew he had made a mistake. Clayton wouldn't have asked for orders. He grinned and tried to chuckle, to make a little joke of it. But Gluck's dark face remained bleak and grim.

"The *Avenger* is ready to take you back to New Dover tomorrow," he said. "You can present this message from the plutocratic Americans to Atlantis Lee. No doubt you will take time to rest from the hardships of your expedition."

The bushy eyebrows lifted knowingly.

"Thank you, sir," Shane replied, grinning more widely.

He made the stiff-armed salute once more, but he was both puzzled and alarmed. Evidently there was something he didn't know about the relationship between Clayton and Gluck. Somehow he had blundered.

He was anxious to meet Atlantis Lee, even though that meeting might be the first test of the great ade—if, as he surmised, Clayton had been on close terms with the lovely girl of the picture.

Shane was a little surprised at himself. This was the sort of bold adventure that would appeal to the reckless audacity of Captain Clayton, yet he really meant that grin himself. There was something haunting about that picture of red-haired, violet-eyed Atlantis Lee.

Gluck's next shrill words were a shock.

"I'm calling a general staff conference aboard the *Nemesis*. It will be necessary for you to give a detailed report of your expedition through the Barrier and to answer all questions about the defenses of America."

"Yes, sir."

Behind Clayton's hard face, Shane felt a chill of dread. Did this mean that the little admiral suspected? A grilling by men who doubtless knew the real Clayton would be a difficult test.

He might never see Atlantis Lee.

XI

Enemy of the Ring

WHITEHALL'S office in the gray old Ring Guard Headquarters building was suddenly still. Even the clock on the plain military bareness of the wall seemed to pause in its muffled ticking.

Dr. Della Rand tried to breathe again, struggled to move her frozen face, to speak. But she could only stare at the old general, who stood so precise and straight behind the military neatness of his desk. She had thought that he was kind, but now his air of stern decision terrified her.

The eerie howl of rocket-jets broke that painful silence. Dully she looked out through the window. Something that looked like a rugged brown boulder dropped toward the flying field, cushioned on the hot blue flame of braking ion-jets. It settled to an easy landing, and the shriek of jets was stilled.

"Clayton's machine," commented Whitehall. "The engineers are testing it today." He looked back at Della Rand, and she saw the dark shadow of pain in his eyes. "I'm sorry, Dr. Rand. It's been a long time since the death penalty has been necessary in civilized America, but that is our decision. In such a case, involving the safety of the Ring, no appeal is allowed."

Della caught her breath with a little gasping sound.

"Perhaps he has to be killed." Her voice sounded false and choked and strange. "But why must I be the one to do it?"

Behind his stern military mask, the slight old Guardsman looked uncomfortable.

"Secrecy is necessary," he explained. "It is just possible that the Outsiders have sent another spy into

the Ring to find out what became of Clayton. Perhaps the risk is small, but we can't afford to take chances. If the Outsiders learned that Clayton is dead, that would be the end of Lieutenant Shane's masquerade."

Della made a tiny nod of understanding.

"You are the only doctor who has been connected with the case," Whitehall went on. "I don't want to call in another. I am requesting you to administer euthanasia merely for Clayton's sake. Of course, you are free to refuse. In that case, I'll call a firing squad for Clayton."

Her strong hands clenched.

"May I have time—time to think?"

He shook his head. "The sentence must be carried out at once. I've already sent for an ambulance to carry Clayton's body to the Ring City crematory. If you wish to refuse, just say so."

She tried to swallow the dry, harsh pain in her throat. With an effort she shut Clayton's reckless green-eyed grin out of her mind. Her duty seemed clear. In a faint, hoarse whisper, she said, "I'll do it."

Whitehall smiled grave approval.

"When you get to the crematory," he added, "don't put Clayton's name on the death certifications. Designate him simply as an enemy of the Ring. I'll notify the officials what to expect."

Walking across toward the white hospital building, she paused to stare at the *Friendship*. The testing crew was just coming out through the valve. They climbed into a waiting car and drove away. Three or four guards were left about the disguised rocket-bomber.

Della felt a painful lump in her throat. Destructive as she knew that machine to be, it was still a symbol of soaring power. It stood for Clayton's hard strength.

Now she was going to put Clayton to a nameless death as an enemy.

THE ambulance startled her. It had come in under silent electric power, but its tires shrieked on the pavement as it stopped by the side door of the hospital. Two men carried a stretcher into the building to wait for Clayton's body.

She hurried on. The morning sunlight was suddenly devoid of warmth. Her body felt numb, and a little shiver shook her. The world wasn't quite real any longer. Her actions were stiff and mechanical.

She found her kit in the locker room downstairs. She went into the laboratory to mix crystal drops of instant death. With hands that were like skilful machines, no longer part of her, she filled the little needle.

The guards led her into Clayton's room. The thick vitroid windows gave a tantalizing view of the broad flying field with the brown, jagged shape of the *Friendship* at the side of it. But they were stronger than steel plate. They needed no bars.

Clayton lay on a mattress on the floor. His hands were manacled in front of him. His ankles were fettered and a short length of chain secured them to a ring-bolt in the wall. Six Guardsmen stood in a row at the other end of the room. They carried no arms, lest the prisoner should secure one of them. But there were six more men in the corridor outside with plenty of guns. The Ring Guard was taking no chances.

"Hello, beautiful."

The chains made a soft little jingle as Clayton sat up on the mattress. He grinned at her. For the moment his hard green eyes held only amusement. His voice was light and calm as ever.

Della merely stood there, the black kit clutched in her clammy hands. Her numb body ceased to exist. A darkness settled over the room. She couldn't see anything but Clayton's grinning face.

"Good-by," Clayton said. "It was nice of you to come."

She clung to his words, and they steadied her. She breathed again. Sudden tears flooded her dry and aching eyes. Clayton knew that he was going to be killed and he wasn't afraid.

"What's the matter, beautiful?" he asked. "Aren't you going to speak to me?"

She couldn't speak. It was all that she could do to hold back hysteria. His eyes dropped from her face to the black bag in her tense hands.

"Oh," he said softly. "You're the executioner?"

Mute and ill, she nodded. Amazingly he grinned again. The chains tinkled as he made a cheerful shrug. His voice was softer than she had ever heard it.

"Don't let it get you down," he comforted. "I'd rather take the poison from you, beautiful, than any other girl I know."

Something happened to her then. The agony of that conflict in her mind became more terrible than she could endure. Clayton's reckless grin and that softness of his voice tipped a balance in her. The conflict was solved.

IT WASN'T an act of reason. Her tortured mind couldn't reason any longer. It had been a conflict of emotions. Now, while Clayton grinned, one emotion won the victory. The other, for the time, was simply blotted out.

Suddenly her purpose was clear. All the numbness left her. Her senses and her mind were sharper than they had ever been. In one lightning instant the plan was made. Her hands were quick and sure.

She opened the black case. Discarding the needle that she had already filled with quick and painless death, she filled another with something else.

Clayton watched her from the mattress on the floor.

"Quite a treat, beautiful," his hard

voice mocked, "to see your own lovely hands mixing the fatal dose."

But she thought that a change had come into his tone, for her alone to hear. It told her that he understood. It thanked her for what she was doing. It said that they were comrades now, boldly playing a desperate game.

"You're a cool one, beautiful." Admirer rang in his voice. "You're the kind I like." Cold steel tinkled as he waved her a kiss. "Good-by. I'm ready when you are."

The new needle was filled with its imitation death. The few bright drops were mixed without research or tests. She realized that any error might have made them fatal, but she knew she had made no error.

General Whitehall was in the doorway, watching silently. Clayton, grinning, managed to slip his own sleeves up. He held out his arms to wait for the needle. It seemed to Della that they were steady as iron. Her quick hands were steady, too. She thrust the tiny point into the vein and drove the little piston home.

"Good-by, beautiful," Clayton murmured wearily.

The hard grin faded. Her heart swelled with tenderness when she saw the face of a tired, bewildered child. He went to sleep. The fetters jingled as he fell back on the mattress. Della put away the needle and found her stethoscope.

Clayton's heart made two faint beats and stopped. She gave the instrument to General Whitehall. He listened, then nodded at the guards. They removed the fetters. The men from the crematory came in and unrolled their stretcher on the floor. Guards lifted Clayton's limp body upon it.

Della followed down the stairs to the waiting ambulance. That march seemed to take a thousand years. She was afraid that Clayton would stir too soon. The drug should keep his heart and breath slowed beyond

detection for four or five minutes. After that—

She started at Whitehall's quiet-voiced statement.

"Thank you, Doctor. Remember about the certificate."

"Of course, General." She asked the ambulance driver, who was waiting by the open doors at the back of the vehicle, "May I ride to the crematory with you?"

"Sure, Doctor." He nodded at the cab. "Get in."

She walked slowly to the cab and climbed into the seat. The key, she saw, was in the lock. She knew she must look tense and pale. But if these men noticed, they must think it was because she had just killed a man, not because she hadn't killed him.

SHE watched them slide the stretcher into the vehicle behind her. Silently she slipped behind the wheel, turned the key. Her foot found the accelerator. She waited. She could scarcely breathe. Her heart paused. At last the doors were closed. The driver and the two others came around toward the cab.

"Hang on." She caught part of Whitehall's low-voiced order to two of the guards. "See him into the furnace. We can't take—"

She stepped on the accelerator, hard. Tires screamed beneath the sudden drive of electric power. The ambulance lunged out of the startled group. A breathless shout faded away.

The ambulance turned on two wheels, jolted across the hospital lawn and burst through a white-painted wooden fence. Lurching and bouncing, it careened across the flying field toward the jagged brown hull of the *Friendship*.

She started the siren. An ambulance racing across the airport was not a novelty. The guards stationed about the disguised rocket-bomber looked about for the crack-up.

"Thanks, beautiful."

Clayton's hard voice was still breathless from the temporary effect of the drug. A little pale, he climbed up into the front seat beside her, but he kept grinning at the startled and bewildered guards about the *Friendship*.

"Neat work, beautiful."

Swiftly searching the glove compartment, he found a heavy automatic. They didn't need it and they had no time to use it.

One of the guards made a gesture to wave them away. A bullet drilled a neat hole in the windshield. Then he and the man beyond had to fling themselves desperately out of the way.

Della didn't set the brakes until she was a few yards from the *Friendship*. Its steel hull finished the task of stopping the ambulance. Clayton had flung open the door of the cab. They stumbled toward the air-lock.

Guards were running across the field. Stray bullets had begun to ping on the rocket's steel hull, but in another second they were aboard. Clayton slammed the valve and ran to the controls.

"They've got armored cars," gasped Della. "Three of them—under tarpaulins in the hangars—with cannon."

"Don't worry, beautiful." Clayton raised his voice above the mounting scream of rockets. "We'll be a hundred miles high before they can get them uncovered. We'll be dive-bombing the Ring Cylinder before they know what has happened!"

XII

Atlantis Lee

IT SEEMED to Barry Shane that he spent a thousand hours at the long metal table in the wardroom of

the *Nemesis*, surrounded by the brown-uniformed officer of Admiral Gluck's staff. From his long trek across the dry sea-floor and the strain of his interview with Admiral Gluck, Shane was near the limit of exhaustion. He didn't try to conceal that. It gave him some excuse for not mentioning names or promptly recognizing faces.

But that exhaustion was real. His faculties were slowed and dulled with it. Once again he spoke of the Barrier as the Ring, and heavy Captain Barlow challenged him harshly.

"Forgive me, Barlow," he said lamely. "I've been drilling myself for years to think like an American. That was necessary to prevent unconscious slips, but the habit persists."

Their questions came in battering volleys. It was easy enough to talk about America. The real danger was that he would display too much knowledge. To half the questions, he said he didn't know. To many, he told the truth. The more these men were interested in what he said, the less attention they would pay to himself. He didn't attempt to lie, except to make them believe that the Ring Cylinder was impregnably defended.

At last they were done.

"Splendid work!" thick-jowled Barlow applauded. "The Black Star will give you your due for this."

Shane felt a tiny shudder of dread. He didn't like Barlow's small, piglike eyes. Several of his questions had appeared faintly suspicious. Did Barlow mean that he knew, that Shane had somehow already betrayed the impersonation? But the thick-set Outsider appeared suddenly friendly.

"Shall we go back to the *Avenger*, Clayton? I can see you're all in and I think you'll need a bit of life when we get to New Dover tomorrow—for her, eh?"

His elbow poked into Shane's ribs. "That's right, Barlow."

Shane followed gratefully into the rocket's elevator. He was all in and he did want to be at his best tomorrow. His life and the fate of America might turn on what happened when he met Atlantis Lee. For all his apprehension, he thought, the real Clayton himself couldn't have been more anxious for that meeting.

Back aboard the *Avenger*, in his tiny metal-walled room, he took out the platinum case before he went to sleep and looked again at her picture. Her violet eyes smiled at him, grave and sweet. Only, he reminded himself, they were smiling for Clayton. The more she loved Clayton, the more likely she was to discover the masquerade and the more she would hate him when she did.

He shut the case and went to sleep.

The lurch and thrust of acceleration woke him. He knew that the *Avenger* had already taken flight for New Dover. He rose and put on the brown uniform and an orderly brought him breakfast—a large bowl of a sweetish yellow gruel.

The Outsiders must have few food animals, he knew, and probably only a limited variety of plants. Probably this mess was synthetic. It did have a faint sharp chemical taste. Such food was one more basis of the jealous envy of America, the paradise beyond the Barrier.

The elevator took him up to the control room in the nose of the rocket. Captain Barlow was not in evidence. The brown-shirted pilot nodded cheerfully from the intricate banks of controls.

"Hello, Clay," he called familiarly. "Want to spell me?"

Shane knew that he ought to reply with the pilot's name.

"Thanks," he said. "I'm not quite up to it today."

The pilot stared curiously. "Something must have hit you pretty hard,

Clay," he commented. "You aren't acting much like Iron Clayton. First time I ever saw you turn down a spell at the rod."

Shane imitated Clayton's careless shrug.

"It was pretty tough." He tried to change the subject. "When do we get to New Dover?"

"Five minutes late." Evidently he was supposed to know the schedule. The pilot smiled challengingly at him. "Unless you want to take the rod and make it up. Guess you're pretty anxious to see Atlantis."

Shane nodded, assumed Clayton's green-eyed grin.

"Lucky guy—" the pilot looked sober and lowered his voice—"if the Black Star lets you keep her!"

SHANE didn't dare ask what he meant. He was a little sorry he had ventured up here. He was supposed to know everything already. Any show of curiosity could give him away. He was glad when the pilot had to look back to his instruments and controls.

Shane looked out through the observation port. The view was both magnificent and appalling. Forgetful of the danger, he caught his breath in audible wonderment.

The rocket was at least a hundred miles high. It was early morning and long, inky shadows made the convex mountainous landscape appear almost as rugged as Earth's long-lost moon, in pictures Shane had seen. The lateral thrust of the rockets altered his sense of down, so that the stark, cragged surface of the planet seemed crazily tilted.

"You've changed, Clay." The pilot's cheerful voice alarmed him. "Staring at the scenery like a yellow cub! Atlantis has got into your blood, all right."

Shane shrugged and tried to grin Clayton's reckless grin. He was more and more certain he would sooner or later betray himself.

Presently the rugged desert of the ocean floor tipped beneath them and swung vertiginously back. Shane knew that this was mid-flight. The rocket was reversed for deceleration. He moved to another view-port to watch for the first glimpse of New Dover.

"There she is!"

There was nothing that Shane could see, except new expanses of stark desolation, plain on plain of dried sea-mud, walled with range on cragged range of wild black-shadowed volcanic mountains. But the cheerful pilot nodded at the telescope beside him.

Through the lenses, Shane glimpsed the city. New Dover stood on the end of a high, rugged, dark plateau. The gray-white metal that walled it against the Outside's grim hostility was probably some aluminum alloy. It was really more a flat disc than a dome. Several upright rockets stood on the level center of it. Grouped about it were a number of smaller domes. More rockets stood upon a long, dark rectangle.

Beyond the city lay fields of dull yellow. The plateau was covered, square mile on square mile, with close-set blocks of yellow. For a moment Shane was completely puzzled. Then he remembered the gold-film storage cells of the *Friendship*. Here were the solar power accumulators, drinking up the sun's tremendous energy.

He was startled by the pilot's cheery voice.

"Anybody would think you had never seen New Dover! Well, you'll be seeing her in an hour. Say, do you think you'll be at Din's tonight?"

"Sure." Reluctantly Shane gave up the telescope. He decided he had better get out of here before he gave himself away. "See you there. I've got another report to write."

He returned to his tiny stateroom. Blue-jowled Captain Barlow came

in a few moments later and began to ask more questions about America. The pig-eyed officer seemed eager and friendly—altogether too eager and friendly. Shane tried not to show his relief when the *Avenger* landed.

The ship descended upon the flattened top of the low metal dome. Her wheels dropped after the landing stanchions had absorbed the shock of descent and dock-hands in air-suits rolled her over a valve in the city's roof. Her bottom valve was sealed against the opening so that the ship's elevator could drop through the roof to the top level of the city.

Shane stepped out of the little cage with Captain Barlow at his side. He mustn't seem to be too interested or astonished, yet his life might depend on what he could quickly see and understand. Swiftly he looked about him.

The elevator had come down into a long space like a covered wharf. Up and down it, other cages were rising and descending. There were piles of crates and bales and kegs and bright metal ingots. Sweaty men with silent electric trucks and cranes were moving cargo.

OUTSIDE, through broad doorways, he glimpsed one of the streets of New Dover. It was roofed, of course, and narrow, so that it was really more like a corridor. The pavement was moving steadily. Perhaps the street below, he thought, moved in the opposite direction.

The people he saw looked hardy and vigorous. They were rather scantily clad in variously colored lustrous metallic-looking material. The warm conditioned air didn't call for much clothing, and fabrics were probably rather scarce and expensive.

Shane was a little surprised at these evidences of vigor and industrial efficiency. New Dover didn't

look like a city about to perish for want of a few gallons of water. Perhaps Clayton had been lying.

"Here she is, Clayton!"

It was Barlow's heavy voice. Once again Shane thought he seemed too friendly. His small, heavy-lidded eyes seemed almost suspiciously watchful. In a moment, however, Shane forgot all his apprehensions about Barlow—for he saw Atlantis Lee.

Shane had been prepared for the ordeal of some ceremonial reception, fitted to the importance of the Secretary of New Britain. He was expecting brass bands, or their Outside equivalent. But the girl came to him across the busy wharf quite alone. He had a few seconds to study her, to try to guess how the real Glenn Clayton would have greeted her.

She was a little taller than he had expected. Her red hair had gleaming lights that the miniature had only suggested. She wore a sort of tunic of a dull, lustrous green. Her walk was deliberate, proud. She really had the manner of a ruler and she was truly beautiful.

Shane knew that he was staring, breathless. He knew the real Clayton wouldn't be doing that. Clayton wouldn't merely surrender to the beauty of Atlantis. He would grin his reckless grin and—

Suddenly Shane wasn't sure exactly what Clayton would do. As the girl came up to him he was seized with panic. He realized that disaster was near, but he was paralyzed. He couldn't think. He couldn't move.

"Hello, Glenn."

The girl stopped in front of him. Her violet eyes smiled gravely. She was lovelier than the picture had hinted. The sheer beauty of her set a pleasant ache throbbing in his heart. Then he was shaken with a black and bitter jealousy for Clayton.

She was speaking again. He could hardly hear the words. He knew that her voice was softly melodious, somehow quite free of the twangy harshness that seemed to characterize the English of New Britain.

"I'm glad that you came safely home," she said. "Do you have an answer from the Americans, Glenn?" Anxiety put tenseness in her voice and there was a cool note of scorn. "Or did the Black Star refuse to let you deliver our message of peace to America?"

Shane saw the hurt in her violet eyes. Desperately he broke the panic that chained him. He caught his breath and tried once more to imagine that he was the real Glenn Clayton. He tried to grin Clayton's reckless, green-eyed grin.

"You're so beautiful that for a moment I couldn't think."

Captain Barlow was standing near. His small, beady eyes were quickly watchful. Shane thought the heavy man had stiffened imperceptibly at the girl's mention of the Black Star. He was almost sure that Barlow had begun to suspect, but he tried to forget the Black Star.

He did the thing he was certain that the real Glenn Clayton should have done. He swept the girl into his hard arms. His eager face brushed through her fragrant hair. He kissed her soft, startled lips thirstily.

The next instant Shane knew that he had made a mistake.

XIII

The Dream of Eden

THE anti-aircraft batteries about the Ring Cylinder and the Ring Guard Headquarters patterned the sky with bursts of white, but the escaping *Friendship* was far too

swift for their range-finders. The howl of rockets faded as she came up through the stratosphere.

Della Rand's dark eyes looked into Clayton's reckless grin.

"There'll be no dive-bombing the Ring Cylinder!" Her voice was low and shaken. "I thought of that before I helped you get away. I knew that all the bombs had been unloaded from the *Friendship*. That was a safety precaution before the test flights began."

"Thanks anyhow, beautiful."

Glenn Clayton locked the controls. He turned to Della Rand, his green eyes bright with elation. He took her in his hard arms and kissed her. Despite the monstrous alarm that had awakened in her, she liked the ruthless pressure of his lips.

"That doesn't matter," he told her. "In three hours we'll be back to Point Fourteen. They'll load the bomb-racks for us there and we can leave word with the patrol to look for Lieutenant Shane."

Della Rand thrust her body out of his arms.

"Do you think I'll let you do that?" Her face had turned a little pale, but her dark eyes flashed. "Do you think I'll let you kill America?"

Clayton grinned. "What did you think you were doing, beautiful, when you set me free?"

"I didn't have time to think. I only knew I couldn't kill you." She stared at his brown face, bit her quivering lip. "Perhaps we could hide the ship somewhere. You can't go on with this insane attack against the Ring."

His face set grimly. "The Black Star doesn't owe America anything. The breaking of the Barrier will give us the water we need. That has been planned since the time when America was only an unpleasant legend. All our cities are built where they won't be flooded when your precious bit of ocean pours down."

Della Rand tried not to shudder. "You owe something to one American," she reminded him in a low, urgent voice. "You owe your life to me."

He gave her his green-eyed grin.

"Don't you worry, beautiful," he said. "I'm going to pay that debt, personally, to you." His hard fingers caught her arm, drew her almost roughly to him. "This way."

She yielded to his kiss, found it queerly sweet, but already she was planning what she must do. It had been impossible for her to murder Clayton. It was equally impossible for her to let Clayton murder America.

"Thank you, darling," he whispered. "I'll never let you be sorry."

But she could see that his greenish eyes remained alertly watchful. Perhaps she had the shadow of a chance, yet she knew it would not be easy.

When the wall of the rockets grew silent, she realized they were above the restraining air. The sky was purple-black above and the gray, misty convexity of America rotated beneath them. As Clayton took the controls again, she moved away from him.

"Wait," he said. "Better stay where I can watch you."

The gun he had found in the ambulance was thrust in his belt. It made her a little ill to realize that he would use it unhesitatingly against her. She watched his brown, busy hands at the controls. He kept talking easily to her, as if they were at peace. But she knew that it was impossible to do anything now. She could only wait and hope for the chance to come.

The dim line of the Atlantic coast drifted back beneath them and presently Della Rand knew that the invisible wall of the Ring was near. Testing the polarizer, Clayton watched her with a new alertness. The chance didn't come.

She didn't know just when they

crossed the Ring, but she saw that the misty Atlantic was sliding away behind them, cut off as if by a long, curved blade. Beneath was the barren mountain desert, where once the sea had flowed Outside.

Clayton seemed to relax. He grinned at her and began testing a new piece of equipment.

"We're through the Barrier. In half an hour we can signal Point Fourteen and tell them to send patrols to look for Lieutenant Shane."

Half an hour—still there was a chance.

"Kiss me, darling," Clayton said. "You'll never be sorry."

ALL her surgeon's strength and quickness flowed into the fingers that snatched the heavy automatic out of Clayton's belt. She didn't wait to threaten him, because no threat would have meant anything to Clayton. He would have used any delay to take the weapon back.

She fired instantly, yet her surgeon's skill was in control. She didn't want to kill him. No matter what he was, she would never want to do that. She tried to do nothing that her skill could not repair.

The gun made a frightful sound. It leaped in her hand and hot smoke stung her face. Clayton's hard body jerked to the bullet's impact. She felt a stab of pain, as if it had been her own flesh, but she clung to her purpose. She stepped away from Clayton before he could gather any strength. She sent a second bullet into the radio, so that it could never send out the message that would betray Barry Shane.

"You win, beautiful."

Clayton's voice seemed to hold no anger, only admiration. The bullet had torn his side horribly. It must have gone deeper than she meant. Already blood was flowing, but Clayton's pale, tense face contrived to grin.

"Let me set her down," he whis-

pered. "I can hold out for that."

He clung for a moment to the console, then lowered himself carefully into the big metal seat. Still dazed, his fingers touched the controls. The ship spun, and Della felt the crushing pressure of deceleration.

Already she was on her knees beside him, trying to stop the blood. That ruthless pressure made it difficult and multiplied the strain on his heart, but Clayton clung grimly to his task and brought the rocket down.

It crashed with bruising, dazing force against the flank of a dark volcanic summit that once the sea had flooded. But the tough hull took the shock. There was no shriek of escaping air.

"Well, darling," Clayton breathed, "here we are."

Consciousness flowed out with his leaking blood, but Della got him out of the chair. With a strength she had never known she possessed, she carried him back to the bunk. She found an emergency surgical kit and dressed the wound, after cauterizing it.

Clayton would live. In two weeks, she thought, he would be able to walk.

She wasn't sure that the radio had been hopelessly destroyed. She made sure. Then, one by one, she smashed the six ion-blast rocket tubes in their ports and the six spares she found in the storeroom aft.

That made the *Friendship* quite helpless. The caterpillar tracks, with which the disguised machine had been able to move over the ground like a crawling boulder, had been hopelessly smashed when Barry Shane landed it at headquarters. They had been removed for repair and had not been replaced. Nor could either of them leave the machine. The air-suit in which Barry Shane had ventured Outside was the only escape equipment that had been aboard.

The charge in the gold-film cells would, Della knew, last indefinitely. The banks of cells would keep the air-machine in operation, condensing exhaled moisture and liberating oxygen from it. There were sufficient supplies of food to last for several months. In addition, the air-machine made starch and glucose.

DELLA RAND came back to Clayton. All the reckless hardness had gone from his face. His monstrous purpose, to shatter the Ring and destroy America, seemed completely incredible now. Smiling a little, she softly smoothed his forehead.

After all, she had managed things well. It would have been difficult for them to hide in America. Here, she supposed, there would be little danger. On the crown of this rugged range, one more boulder would hardly be discovered. She forgot that she was a brisk, efficient surgeon. She let herself dream. The disguised hulk of the fallen rocket was a tiny world, secure against invasion. She and the tall Outsider could find a kind of happiness here.

The dream ran on. In case some catastrophe did overtake America, in spite of Shane's efforts, she and Clayton might survive. The breaking of the Ring would make a new sea in the dry valley below them. Perhaps the deep would hold enough air so that they could breathe. In time they might emerge from the *Friendship*—a new Adam and another Eve.

Della bent and her lips brushed his gently.

"Thanks, beautiful."

His faint whisper shocked her. She searched the pale mask of his face.

"Do you really mind, Glenn?" she asked. "Do you mind so very much?"

"Don't you worry, beautiful." He tried to grin. "I didn't really need to get back. Your bold American

spy will be taken care of without any help from me."

"What do you mean?" she whispered apprehensively.

"There's a man named Barlow who wants my place in the Black Star," his whisper explained. "I was playing him along until I could learn all about his plot." Clayton's pale lips smiled as if deadly intrigue had been merely an exciting game. "Barlow, no doubt, will take care of Shane. It'll be a good joke on both of them."

Della Rand bit her lip. "Oh, if I hadn't smashed the rockets—"

"But you did, beautiful." Clayton's green eyes mocked her. "We're stuck here together. Shane might be on another planet, for all the warning you can give him." He grinned. "Do you mind—so very much?"

For answer, Della bent and kissed his lips lightly.

"Thanks, beautiful," he murmured.

He closed his eyes, thinking. When the time came to leave the *Friendship*, he could manage it. Some rocket would pass in sight of them. He wouldn't need a radio. A signal light would do. He smiled again, thinking how confused Barlow would be when the treacherous rat found he had murdered the wrong Clayton.

XIV

"Time's Up, Traitor!"

ON THAT busy wharf under the metal roof of New Dover, Atlantis Lee stiffened in Shane's embracing arms. Her lips were cold to his. They drew away, and the red-haired Secretary of New Britain spoke quietly.

"Let me go, Glenn."

That was all she said, but the icy restraint of her voice seemed to cover something more than pain and anger. Her calm tone stung like a slap in the face. Shane released her and stepped back. He knew that the hard brown features that Della Rand's surgery had given him, the living mask of Glenn Clayton, were flushed with an unwonted color of confusion. But he forgot to wonder what Clayton would have done.

"I—I'm sorry," he stammered. "Please—"

"It's a little late to be sorry now." Her voice was painful as a whip. "I could never understand you, Glenn. Certainly I'll never make an attempt again."

She stepped away from him, so that heavy-pig-eyed Captain Barlow stood almost between them. Her face was cold as marble, and her violet eyes were dark with the shadow of some old hurt. Shane couldn't understand Clayton, either. He was suddenly bewildered and angry at whatever Clayton had done to make this girl despise him so. But that feeling didn't help. He had his masquerade to think about, his life and the safety of America.

"Sorry, beautiful." He tried to grin Clayton's hard, reckless grin. "You used to forgive me."

It hurt him to see the wrath on her face, yet he knew that Clayton would have enjoyed it and he kept grinning. Her red head jerked angrily. The smooth column of her throat pulsed as she swallowed. She tried visibly to smooth the pain and the anger away.

"Rage is becoming to you, beautiful," he commented lightly. "It sets a sparkle in your eyes."

"Please, Glenn!"

Her voice was low and grave. With one little nod she seemed to dismiss everything that had happened. Her violet eyes flashed with a proud humility. A painful lump came into Shane's throat. He wanted

desperately to make peace, to get her forgiveness, to take away all her hurt. But he had to keep in character.

"Okay, beautiful." He tossed her the thick gray envelope that held America's offer of peace, of water in a fair exchange for oil and metals and power. It fell on the floor. He picked it up and gave it to her lazily. "This ought to make you happy."

He stood admiring the unconscious grace of her hands as she tore open the gray envelope and anxiously unfolded the heavy stiff letterhead of the American Corporation Control Board. Her violet eyes drank in the message. It did make her happy.

"Glenn, it's wonderful! I knew the Americans couldn't be so bad as the Black Star claims. I knew they would be generous, if we would just give them a chance." Tears brimmed in her eyes. "Glenn, I could kiss you!"

"Here I am," he said.

Amazingly she did kiss him. She laughed, and her warm lips lightly brushed his cheek. He didn't dare take her in his arms again.

"Glenn, I could never understand you," she repeated, her bewildered violet eyes searching his face. "You knew—you must have known—what this letter said and still you brought it to me." Then a doubt was on her white face. "Or is this just one of your jokes?"

Shane forgot to grin. "It isn't a joke," he said soberly.

"The Americans are really willing to be friendly?"

"Of course they are," he told her. "I think they would give us water to relieve our temporary distress, without any payment at all. But they do need oil and metals and power. They are anxious to open trade."

BESIDE him, Captain Barlow made an abrupt, angry move-

ment. He said nothing, but his heavy, greasy face had a sullen look. Shane wished that Barlow hadn't heard, wondered what he wanted, what he was waiting for. The girl herself looked surprised.

"Do you mean that, Glenn? You aren't just trying to hurt me again?"

"Of course I mean it, beautiful." Remembering that he was Clayton, he grinned. "Did you think that I was a green-eyed monster?"

"Maybe I did," she said gravely. She scanned his face again. He saw that the letter was trembling in her hands. "I can't believe it! Will you come to the League? Will you tell them that?"

She waited anxiously for his answer. At Shane's side, Captain Barlow cleared his throat. It was a noisy bark of warning. Shane hesitated. Didn't Barlow have anywhere to go? Another thought made him shiver. He didn't like the way Barlow clung to him. Now he thought he guessed the big man's purpose.

It had seemed a little odd that Admiral Gluck had been so willing to grant Shane two weeks' leave. His unexpected report about the decoherer must have precipitated a crisis in the plans of the Black Star, whatever they were. It was a little strange that Clayton, the one man who knew the most about America and that imaginary weapon, could be so readily spared—unless Admiral Gluck suspected something!

Looking at Barlow's pig-eyed face, Shane tried not to shudder. Were they just giving him enough rope to hang himself? Was Barlow detailed to shadow him, to keep a record of all his slips and errors until the evidence was certain?

Slowly Shane turned back to Atlantis Lee. She was an ally. Besides, she was beautiful. It made his heart beat faster just to look at her. He knew he loved her already. He wanted to tell her who he really was,

yet he didn't dare. Perhaps she wanted peace with America, but still she was a citizen of New Britain. He wondered if she wasn't, unconsciously and unwillingly, still in love with Glenn Clayton. She couldn't be expected to aid an American spy.

He would have to tell her that it was he who had captured Clayton, that the Ring Guard had decided that the prisoner must die before Shane left America. He was, in a way, responsible for Clayton's death. He couldn't tell her.

"Will you come, Glenn?" she asked again, urgently. "Will you speak to the League?"

"Sure, beautiful." He grinned. "I'll tell them anything you like."

That wasn't what he wanted to say, but he had to keep in character. Within the limitations of his role, he was determined to do all he could to help the cause of peace. If trade were actually begun, before the only defense of America was found to be a lie, the disaster might be averted. Atlantis bit her lip, annoyed.

"I'll telegraph the delegates," she said at last. "The League will meet at twelve tomorrow." Her shoulders stiffened defiantly under the green tunic. "Perhaps the Black Star has taken the real power. Perhaps the League is just a shadow, but it still has a constitutional authority. For once I'll take the risk of using it." Her violet eyes were pleading. "If you will come, Glenn, really?"

"I'll come," Shane told her soberly.

She smiled and took his hand. Her grasp was firm and cool, and it made his heart beat faster. Then she left him. Shane watched her go with a dull ache in his throat. He was sorry she had gone.

SUDDENLY he was uncomfortably aware of Captain Barlow waiting beside him—waiting, he suspected, for him to make some fatal blunder. Shane didn't know

what to do next. He didn't know where Clayton would stay in New Dover. He didn't even know where the League would meet next day. Still Barlow waited, his piggy eyes watchful.

"Going my way?" Shane said desperately.

"All right." The blue-jowled face was a heavy mask that betrayed no thought. "If you have anything to drink at the apartment."

At least he knew now that Clayton had an apartment. It was cheering news—if Barlow would guide him to it. That would give him a chance to relax if too many friends of Clayton didn't unexpectedly turn up. After he got rid of Barlow, he ought to be able to learn a few things by studying Clayton's papers and effects.

"There ought to be something." He made a weary little gesture. "Glad to have you along, Barlow. I'm about all in today."

"You aren't acting yourself," the heavy man agreed.

Again Shane tried not to shudder. He tried to hope that his apprehension had no base, but the double meaning in Barlow's words seemed ominously clear.

Displaying a fatigue that he really felt, he let Barlow lead the way. Another elevator dropped them four levels. They stepped upon the moving floor of a corridor-street. At a corner, they descended a stair to another, moving at right angles.

At last Barlow stepped off in front of a door and waited for Shane to open it. Shane had Clayton's ring of keys. Fortunately the second one he tried happened to fit, but he thought that Barlow's small animal eyes reflected new suspicion.

The apartment was larger and more luxurious than he had anticipated. There were half a dozen spacious rooms. The chill of metal walls was relieved with tapestries. Deep-piled rugs, perhaps of some mineral

fiber, covered the floor. Shane didn't know where to look for a drink.

"Help yourself," he told Barlow, "if you can find anything. I just want to rest."

He dropped into a big chair, found he didn't have to simulate exhaustion. Barlow went into another room. Presently he came back with two tall glasses. He cleared his throat and said:

"Don't you think you're going too far?"

Shane blinked and prevented himself from shivering. He managed to keep his hand steady as he accepted the drink.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"You'll find out tonight."

It sounded like a threat. Staring sullenly, Barlow drained his glass and wiped his thick lips on the back of a hairy hand. He stamped out of the room. Puzzled and worried, Shane locked the door behind him.

Shane began an anxious search for information. In the bedroom were several pictures of women, all different, all with endearing inscriptions. That was hard to understand, when there had been Atlantis Lee.

He paused in the dressing room to try on some of Clayton's clothing. The garments didn't fit exactly. The Outsider had been slightly taller, larger, straighter. In far-off Ring City, making the plan, Shane had hardly thought of clothing. Now, when he was wondering what to wear when he spoke before the League tomorrow, the matter assumed an alarming importance.

The letters and other metal foil documents in a big desk revealed nothing new. Clayton must have hidden or destroyed every important document before he started on the adventure to America.

AT LAST, behind a tapestry, Shane found the door of a concealed wall safe. He caught his breath. Perhaps this held the evi-

dence that would show Clayton's connection with the Black Star or something else equally revealing. But he was unable to open the combination lock. Tomorrow he would try to find a locksmith.

He settled down to study one of the odd metal foil newspaper rolls. The advertising gave him the names of streets and stores and resorts, lists and prices of commodities, a thousand items that he might desperately need to know.

A heavy knock interrupted him. Tense to face a new emergency, Shane laid aside the roll and magnifier and unlocked the door. Barlow thrust himself into the room, followed by four nervous men in brown. They all wore paralysis guns. Barlow's blue-jowled face was damp with perspiration.

"Sorry to disturb you." His voice was hoarse and uneasy. "Just a routine matter." His trembling hands pushed out a rolled sheet of gray metal foil. "If you'll just put the Black Star seal on this warrant."

Shane blinked and gulped.

"The seal?" He caught himself and tried to conceal his astonishment. With narrowed eyes he surveyed the sweating men again. "For a routine matter, you all look pretty excited."

Barlow thrust the rattling sheet at him.

"It's no secret that you are leader of the Black Star. No secret to us." His piglike eyes glittered anxiously. "You keep the seal here?"

Shane swallowed again and tried to stop the room from spinning. This was astounding. Clayton himself was the secret leader of the Black Star!

For a moment that seemed incredible. If Clayton had such power, why hadn't he sent some subordinate on the dangerous mission to America? The answer was Clayton's own character. Besides, it was pos-

sible that the prestige won by his successful preliminary expeditions had helped earn the leadership.

Shane bit his lip. It was no wonder that Clayton had refused to talk about the Black Star. If Shane had known this, he might have been able to assume that power for himself. Now, as he faced the uneasy, ominous faces of the men in brown, it seemed too late.

"Where's the seal?" demanded Barlow.

That was what Shane also wanted to know. In all his searches of this apartment, the *Friendship*, and Clayton's own person, he hadn't found anything that could be the seal. Of course, it might be in that safe, but Clayton more likely had hidden it so cleverly he would never find it at all in the time these men would give him.

Shane's eyes challenged Barlow. "It seems to me you're a little too curious about where I keep the seal. This looks like a ruse to get your hands on it." He glanced briefly at the metal foil document. "What is it?"

Barlow wet his lips and blinked his small animal eyes. Two of the men stepped alertly to his side. The others moved behind Shane. Their hands stayed near their guns.

"We have information that Atlantis Lee is calling a special meeting of the League." Barlow's voice was flat and ominous. "She is plotting to deal with our enemies in America, in defiance of the Black Star."

"On the contrary," Shane said, "she told me about this meeting. I am going to attend myself. What is that document?"

Barlow glared at him. "This is a warrant for the arrest of Atlantis Lee on the charge of suspicion of treason." The metal sheet rattled as he added, "The time has come for the Black Star to smash the last vestige of the League."

Shane stepped forward. "You

knew I wouldn't put the seal to that!" He made his voice crack hard. "You knew I was going to speak at the League!"

Barlow flinched uneasily from his eyes.

"Let me tell you now," Shane rapped. "The extreme policies of the Black Star are going to be changed. I have learned that the Americans are willing to be friendly. We can get far more by peaceful trade than by war. I'll never order and never allow another attack on the Barrier!"

Barlow crumpled up the warrant and threw it on the floor.

"That's what we wanted to know." His voice was a tense, hurried croaking. "The aim of the Black Star, from the very beginning, has been to destroy the Barrier. It is as important to avenge ourselves on those who shut us Outside as it is to fill our own seas again. Any man who opposes that purpose is a traitor to the Black Star."

His sweaty face made an uneasy grimace.

"I've been planning to get you, Clayton," he rasped, "ever since you beat me out of the leadership. But I never hoped you'd lay yourself so wide open. I used to think you were clever, but your time's up, traitor!"

XV

Life Was A Dream

DELLA RAND, a board the *Friendship*, had fired the bullet with a surgeon's knowledge. After the disguised rocket fell upon that bleak volcanic summit, which once the Atlantic had covered, she had repaired Glenn Clayton's wound with a surgeon's care and skill. She couldn't fail. The tall Outsider's hard, green-eyed grin moved her

with a feeling that was as strong as her love for America. Always she had risen to emergencies. A calm confidence ruled her hands. She had no fear of blunders.

The wound healed swiftly. Sooner than she had expected, Clayton was able to leave his bunk for tiny expeditions about the disabled machine. He showed no great concern about the smashed rocket-tubes.

"Well, beautiful, you're thorough," he complimented. Still a little pale and hollow, his hard face grinned. "You must like my company, taking such precautions as this."

He put his arms around her and she was careful not to hurt his healing wound. When he kissed her, she liked the harshness of the stubble on his chin. She closed her eyes and let herself dream again of the new Adam and another Eve.

Glenn Clayton let her dream. Now he had a role to play and a secret to keep. He was resolved to make no blunder. He kissed her and they went on with the business of taking an inventory of the supplies aboard.

"The air machine manufactures carbohydrates," he told her. "With that we can keep going two years, anyhow." His green eyes seemed warm and kind. "Like the prospect, beautiful?"

She did and she let him know it, for two years would be an eternity of paradise. There was scarcely any need to look beyond that time. But she let herself dream of a day when they might walk out of the rocket to begin a new life somewhere.

Clayton let her go on dreaming. Della didn't object when he set up the telescope. The instrument was small. The perfect vision in the airless Outside, together with a powerful system of electronic amplification, made large lenses or reflectors needless. The image was reflected on a screen.

"Time here will hang heavy, beautiful," he said, "even for you and

me. We must plan our lives in this world of ours, keep doing things. Let's have a look at the stars."

Della didn't guess his purpose. She was eager to follow any interest of his, happy because he was accepting this situation with such apparent cheer. The control room in the nose of the helpless ship became their observatory.

Glenn Clayton proved to be an excellent astronomer. The Outsiders had lived for two centuries under perfect astronomical conditions. The catastrophe of the passing Dwarf had given them a sharp, if rather apprehensive interest in the mysteries of illimitable space. Clayton, as she already knew, had a keen and ready mind.

The little round screen was black, or sometimes gray with dusty nebulae. Stars swam across it and seemed to come near or recede again as Clayton's fingers moved the controls. He was talking easily to Della, who sat beside him on the big chair's arm, about the wonders of the southern constellations they explored.

He started when he saw the object.

"There!" he whispered. Then, sensing the alarm that he had caused, he tried to allay it. "A comet." He pointed to a tiny fleck of white that Della soon lost again among the dazzling stars. "It must be a comet, because it wasn't there last night. We're discoverers, beautiful."

FOR a moment she felt admiration for his photographic memory of the heavens. Fondly she touched his hard shoulder and a sudden doubt shocked her. His shoulder was tense. She felt his concealed excitement.

"What's so important about a comet?" she asked.

"Nothing, beautiful." He grinned. "But it's the first new thing that's happened today."

Della chilled to a secret fear that life might grow stale for them in the tiny world of the ship. She was afraid that Clayton would find a way to leave her and the dim dread turned to dark alarm.

"Is that a ship?" she whispered.

Clayton had thought that it was the blast-glow of a distant Barrier Patrol rocket. That was what had startled him. But in a moment he knew that his hope was defeated.

"No such luck, beautiful. A ship would move much faster."

Alarm had chilled her voice.

"A ship wouldn't see the *Friendship*," she told him. "We look like a boulder. You aren't to signal, Glenn. I'm stronger than you are till your side gets well."

His pale grin mocked her.

"But only till I get well." He looked back at the little screen. "Anyhow, beautiful, we've got a whole new comet to amuse us."

She tried to follow his work. He increased the electronic magnification enormously, until the tiny fleck of the comet crawled visibly across the screen. With instruments he recorded the rate of its motion.

"The elements," he said at last. "Now where's it going?"

She couldn't follow any farther, but he took readings from the instrument and set them up on a little calculator. The first result banished his grin. He turned back quickly to the telescope screen for another observation.

"What have you found?" Della wanted to know.

"Nothing," he said. "Nothing that could be."

That was all that he would tell her. But he worked on and on through the night, until the slow rotation of the heavens carried the strange body below the ragged southern horizon. Even then he waited to check the positions of Venus and Mars before he slept.

All the next night he worked

again, silent and abstracted. Then, at last, he told her.

"You might as well have saved your bullet, beautiful." His lean face was haggard from the long effort. His voice had a gravity that was new, yet something made him grin sardonically. "That comet is going to smash the Barrier, and your precious America, more completely than all our rocket-bombers could have done."

She clutched at the big chair's arm for support.

"The Ring is strong!" she protested. "It's strong enough to stop the heaviest meteors."

"This is more than a meteor, beautiful."

Tense and breathless, she waited for him to go on. Even now his hard voice rang lightly. It seemed to her that Clayton rejoiced in danger. She had never seen him afraid.

"It's more than a comet, too. It's round and solid and it doesn't have any tail. It's still so far away that I can't measure it very closely. And I still haven't been able to estimate its mass from the perturbations of other planets." His green eyes seemed maliciously gleeful. "But I can guess, darling!"

She tried twice before her husky whisper came. "What can you guess?"

"It is coming out of the same part of the sky where the Dwarf disappeared two hundred years ago, after it had stripped the air and the oceans off the Earth—except under your precious Ring, sweetheart."

"You think—" Della gulped. "You think this is the Dwarf?"

"Why not?" he asked lightly. "It's the same size. It's coming from the same direction. Of course, the astronomers two hundred years ago said that it was going to go on in space, never to return. But astronomy was pretty well disorganized by the time the Dwarf had passed. Suppose they were mistaken. Its

mass was only a fraction of the sun's. Suppose that it was pulled into a long cometary orbit. Suppose that it is just now returning for a second visit. Anyhow, darling, that's my guess."

She stared at his brown, smiling face. She didn't know what to believe. Perhaps it was all a joke or a ruse to get her to let him signal a ship.

"How close will it come this time?" Her low voice asked.

"The aim seems to be improving." A shadow drowned the reckless glint of his eyes. "That's what I've been working on these past two nights." His bronze head made a grave little nod. "This time, sweetheart, the Dwarf isn't going to miss us."

She stepped back a little, and her voice went sharp. "Glenn, is this a joke?"

He shook his head. "None of mine, anyhow, beautiful. If the forces that rule the cosmos have a sense of humor, it may be a joke to them, but that body is coming straight toward Earth's orbit. Collision is inevitable. There won't be much left."

Her exhaled breath made a tiny sob.

"Even your precious Barrier won't be much use," he told her, "after the whole planet is smashed into white-hot vapor. If this is a joke, it is one on the whole human race, the Black Star as well as America. Even on your daring Lieutenant Shane!"

XVI

The Black Star Seal

IN CLAYTON'S apartment, listening to Captain Barlow's harsh-voiced threat, Shane reached for the

paralysis gun at his hip. The two men behind him seized his arms before he could draw it.

"Hold him!" Barlow rasped from a safe distance. "Get the gun!" He came closer when Shane was disarmed, his broad face leering triumphantly. "All right, Clayton. Where is it?"

"Where's what?" evaded Shane.

While the two men held Shane, Barlow threatened him with the thick cylinder of his paralysis gun.

"You know what," he snarled. "I want the Black Star seal. You know that it is the rule for each leader of the Black Star to hand the seal and his authority on to another—before he dies." His voice went hard with menace. "Where's the seal?"

"I don't know." That was the truth, but Shane managed Clayton's mocking grin. He tried not to reveal the despair he felt. Barlow obviously meant to murder him. Even if he had the emblem of authority, it would be of no use to him now. He added, "You might take a look around."

"We're going to," said Barlow, his look malevolent.

At his curt nod, the two sweaty men behind him nervously stepped forward to search Shane's pockets. They found only the little platinum case.

"It might be too large to carry," Barlow said, "or he might be afraid to carry it. Search the rooms." He made a noisy gulp. "And hurry! Don't stand there like a pair of frightened fools!"

Pale and uneasy, the two ran and began rummaging frantically through the several rooms. Shane watched, trying to maintain Clayton's reckless grin.

"Frankly, Barlow," he said in the words he thought Clayton might have spoken, "I don't believe you'll like it. You seem uneasy already and the longer you hold the seal, the

more you'll have to be afraid of."

"Blast you, Clayton!" the big man growled. "Where is it?"

"There's a wall-safe behind the tapestry in the second room," Shane told him. "You might try that."

In a moment the men found the safe, but Barlow was afraid to let them touch it.

"Leave it alone," he warned uncertainly. "It might be a bomb or an alarm. He was a bit too willing to tell us where it was." His pig-eyes came watchfully back to Shane. "Clayton, I think we had better dispose of you without any further delay."

"Go ahead," Shane shrugged and tried to ignore the prickle of deadly apprehension along his spine. Barlow's obvious fear only made the big man more dangerous, more anxious to get him out of the way. He tried to grin. "What are your plans?"

Anxiously the men in brown had leveled their weapons. The paralysis guns, Shane realized, were ideal for such an occasion. Used at full power on the higher nerve centers, they were instantly deadly and they made no sound. Shane waited for the black impact of death.

"No, not yet." Barlow stopped them and turned to Shane. "Clayton, I'll give you a choice. Hand over the seal, without any tricks or fuss, and you can have a nice, easy death. They say a man never even feels the ray on his brain."

Shane had to swallow before he could trust his voice.

"And," he prompted, "what if I refuse?"

"We'll take you to the vacuum cell. That fits our plans much better, anyhow. It will appear in the records of the Black Star that you were tried by a party court and sentenced to the vacuum cell for treason. The cell isn't comfortable for a live man." His broad face was thrust forward. "What's your choice, Clayton?"

Shane shrugged. "I don't want to spoil your hunt for the seal." His borrowed voice rang out light and clear, but he felt numb and cold and ill. His own words seemed to come from far away. "You'll have to take me to the cell."

Barlow's thick lips quivered with anger.

"Let's see your grin in the vacuum cell—with your own blood boiling out of your body!" The gaping muzzle of his weapon gestured at the door. "Get moving!"

DIMLY Shane had hoped that the trip to the vacuum cell, wherever it was, would give him some opportunity to escape or to call for aid. But Barlow's plot was more completely organized than he could have suspected.

The moving pavement outside was stopped. Ropes were stretched across the corridor-street at the ends of the block. Brown-clad Black Star guards were stationed there. Men in blue, with noisy pneumatic equipment, were making unnecessary repairs to the pavement.

Barlow's men rushed him across the corridor into a convenient elevator. It dropped them through a darkened shaft. They emerged in a narrow passage, somewhere deep in the hivelike city, walled with plates of gray-painted steel.

For five minutes they pushed Shane along it until a metal door stopped them. Barlow found a key and unlocked the massive door. Then he stopped Shane with a wave of his heavy hand.

"Still time, Clayton," he said. "An easy death if you want to change your mind. Just tell me where the seal is."

Shane made his stiff face grin. "You might try that safe," he said.

"Get inside!" Barlow jabbed him with the weapon. "We'll try the safe, all right. We're rid of you, whether we find the seal or not."

A kick sent Shane reeling into the cell.

"Last chance!" croaked Barlow.

As he thought Clayton might have done, Shane thumbed his nose. The airtight door closed with a heavy muffled sound. The lock made a dull click. He was alone in the bare, windowless cell. Dim blue light came through a small, heavy glass plate in the ceiling.

Shane looked around apprehensively.

The metal walls and the metal floor were bare. The only thing to attract attention was a metal valve high in the opposite wall. That must be the outside wall of this dome-city. The valve was intended to let the air out of this death chamber.

Barry Shane crossed the floor to examine it. It was two feet in diameter, large enough for his body to pass through if it weren't for those bars over the inside. But the bars seemed strong enough. Anyhow, what would be the use of getting outside? A man would die as quickly there as in this lethal chamber.

Shane felt weak and ill. He sat down on the cold metal floor and wiped chill sweat off his face. He had failed. That realization was more painful than the danger to his life. Clayton had beaten him, after all, merely by keeping silent about the danger of Barlow's rivalry and his own unsuspected possession of the Black Star seal.

Where was the seal?

Squatting on the floor, Shane began to wonder what Clayton would have done with the seal. It kept him from thinking about what would happen when Barlow opened the valve.

Since apparently it was the sole proof of his power and position as master of the Black Star party, Clayton wasn't likely to have entrusted it to anyone else. Neither was he apt to leave it in such an

obvious place as the safe in his apartment. The logical thing would be to carry the seal on his person.

BUT Shane had searched the Outsider when he first captured him. There had been only the thin platinum case that contained the picture of Atlantis Lee and a few other trinkets, such as the heavy platinum ring.

Absently Shane turned the ring on his finger. He was certain, too, that the seal couldn't have been hidden aboard the *Friendship*, unless it had been cleverly disguised.

He caught his breath and stood up abruptly. With fingers that trembled a little, he slipped off the massive ring. He remembered Clayton's protest against giving it up. The plain platinum bezel was larger than the star-shaped impression of the seal.

The idea seemed fantastic. Barlow and his men had evidently been looking for something larger, for they hadn't given the ring a second glance. But then, they had never seen the seal.

With quivering fingers he twisted at the bezel. It failed to yield. Shane gave a bitter laugh. After all, there was no use getting excited about it. Even if he found the seal, it would be of no use to him now.

Under the bezel, he found a tiny stud.

He pressed it. The top of the bezel snapped back. It was merely a platinum cover. Beneath was revealed a star-shaped jewel. It was black crystal, scintillating with tiny vanishing points of diamond light.

His quivering fingers fumbled in his pockets and found a scrap of the gray metal foil. When he pressed it against the coruscating jewel, it came away, marked with that inimitable striated mark.

He had the Black Star seal!

With a weary sigh, Shane snapped down the metal cover and replaced

the ring on his finger. It was of no use to him now. He only hoped that Barlow wouldn't be clever enough to discover it if they searched his body. He had admired Clayton, but there was little to like about Barlow.

S-s-s-s-s!

Shane started and went cold at the sound of that thin, deadly hiss. He saw that the valve-gate was sliding aside slowly behind the massive bars. The room felt cold and a mist of condensing moisture swirled like a ghostly shape under the blue light. The air was going out.

Barlow might open the valve slowly to prolong his discomfort. That didn't matter greatly. The end would be the end. The Black Star seal was no use to him now.

Then something happened to the valve. First, there was a tapping. Then an explosion made a dull, muffled thump. The air was already nearly too tenuous to carry sound. The gate was ripped away, and Shane saw stars in the dark sky Outside.

Whoof!

The air was gone.

Shane knew that Barlow and his men hadn't been responsible for that explosion. Somebody else had caused it, but he had no time for riddles. He opened his mouth, threw back his head, and exhaled swiftly so that lungs and eardrums might escape rupture.

Only agony was left in his lungs. Automatically he tried to breathe. That only increased the pain. His ears hurt. A savage force was pushing his eyes out of their sockets. He could hardly see.

But he did glimpse the long wrecking bar that had been thrust through the valve. It fell on the floor. The metal quivered under his feet, but his throbbing, roaring ears, in the vacuum, heard no sound.

Somebody was Outside. Somebody had come to help him. That seemed incredible, yet he had no time or

power to think. His reeling brain was too numb.

He picked up the wrecking bar. It was made for such jobs as this. There was a sharp blade of some hard, bright alloy and biting claws that worked on a fulcrum. He set the blade against the base of one bar and threw his weight on the handle.

The blade cut through, but his strength was ebbing. His, aching lungs tried to breathe and found no air. A froth of blood and expanding oxygen strangled him. The metal walls seemed to recede. Black splotches blotted out his sight.

He worked on blindly. He tried to grin Clayton's hard grin, for no audience at all. He lifted the tool and brought it down again and once again.

One bar was out of the way, then another. The tool dropped out of his frozen hands, but perhaps the space was large enough.

He thrust himself into it. Dimly he knew that hands had grasped him. With all that was left of his strength, he kicked and squirmed and pushed.

He slipped through the valve. It came to him, with a sense of far, dim wonder, that he was Outside—where no naked human animal could live!

XVII

Man Outside

A HACKING cough choked off his breathe. All the pain had gone. There was only wonder left and a comfort in the nearness of oblivion. He did his best to see, but his eyes were almost past seeing.

There was the terrible, black sky over cruel, dead mountains that had been the bottom of the sea. There

was some low, sledlike machine near him. It must be night, for the machine was not much more than a blot of shadow. There were two bulky figures in air-suits.

Who could they be?

Queerly that question lingered in his ebbing mind, even after he had forgotten the need to breathe. But it was dark, or else his eyes had grown too dim to see. He knew that they were slipping a helmet over his head. He felt them wrapping him in the stiff fabric of an air-suit. Oxygen hissed into his lungs. It seared his throat and burned like fire in his lungs, but he labored desperately and painfully to breathe.

Then he was in a white bed. Through small, heavy windows, he could see a rocky landscape, glaring strangely bright under the Outside's ominous sky. Two or three miles away, he saw the flat gray dome of New Dover. He knew he was in one of the smaller structures outside the dome-city.

He moved a little, and Atlantis Lee came silently around the bed. A shaft of sunlight, as she passed it, turned her hair to sudden red glory. But her face looked tense and white, and her smile was grave.

"Feel better?" she asked, her voice low and musical.

Shane tried to speak. His throat felt as if iron hooks had torn it.

"Don't talk if it hurts," she soothed. "You'll feel better in a few minutes. Dr. Wolf just looked you over. There's nothing wrong that a little rest won't fix."

He managed a faint, painful whisper.

"Didn't know a man—could live—Outside."

"The combined oxygen in the blood is enough to keep life going for several minutes. The main danger was rupture of the lungs or blood vessels. Dr. Wolf says you didn't suffer anything serious." His tense smile reflected her admiration. "Cut-

ting those bars must have taken courage and strength."

"Thanks," he whispered. "It was you who got me out?"

"With the help of some friends."

"How did you know—"

A TALKING cough choked off his question, and his throat burned with intense misery again.

"Dr. Wolf left this for you." She held a glass of something to his lips. It had a sharp, biting taste, but immediately he felt better. "We had a friend in touch with Barlow's plot. He learned about the warrant for my arrest and your refusal to sign it. We had planned the escape beforehand, in case one of us went to the vacuum cell."

"Us?" whispered Shane.

"There's just a handful of us," she said, "all that's left of the old democratic opposition to the Black Star. We've kept together a little underground organization, hoping somehow to prevent the destruction of the Barrier and bring peace between America and New Britain."

"Where are we?" Shane inquired, looking across the dead miles to New Dover.

"Lee Observatory," she said, her eyes watchful.

"Thanks, beautiful." Shane remembered that he was Glenn Clayton and tried to grin. His throat felt slightly better. "Nice of you to help an old enemy."

"Don't be an idiot!" She came close to the bed, and her worried violet eyes looked down at him. "If you feel able to talk, tell me who you are."

Shane tried not to look astonished.

"Could you forget me, darling?"

"I haven't forgotten Clayton." Her voice seemed to indicate that she wished she could. "You look the part—almost—but you just don't know the lines. You've made half a dozen blunders. The worst one was getting caught by Barlow. Clayton

had been watching Barlow set his trap for two years, planning to catch Barlow himself in it whenever it was sprung." She glanced at the window. "And Clayton wouldn't have asked where we are."

"All right," Shane yielded. But Clayton's green-eyed grin seemed natural now. "I'm Barry Shane, American. We caught Clayton before he could smash the Barrier. I came out in his place."

"That was foolish." Her grave eyes smiled again. "But I like you for it."

Shane watched her face.

"Don't you want to know what happened to him?" He had to catch his breath before he could go on. "It was I who captured him. When I left, he was awaiting execution for attempted escape."

For a long period she looked past him. Then her red head shook slightly.

"It would have mattered once," she said softly, "but things have changed."

Shane felt relieved.

"I'm glad," he told her huskily. "I was afraid you would hold me responsible for his death. You see, he was carrying your picture."

"You thought that—and still you told me?" Her white face smiled. "I think you're all right, Barry Shane. Glenn wanted me to marry him. I might have done it once if he hadn't insisted that I must join the Black Star and abandon our little opposition party."

"I'm glad you didn't. You knew he was the leader of the Black Star?"

She nodded. "He told me when he asked me to marry him. In fact, a good many people knew besides Barlow and his gang. Clayton had a few trusted subordinates. It's impossible to keep such information really secret. Somebody must know where the Black Star's orders come from."

Shane sat up in the bed.

"What's the situation now?" he asked. "Barlow will be desperate when he finds out I was rescued. Now that he has shown his hand, he knows he'll have to win or die. Can he find me here?"

Anxiously he watched her face.

"Probably," she answered. "Most of the opposition to the Black Star exists among our scientists and engineers. The observatory has been a headquarters for our small group. Barlow and his henchmen will know where to look. A rocket took off from the city before sunrise. It's probably Barlow's *Avenger*."

Shane looked out again across the dead, harshly-lit miles to New Britain.

"What about weapons and defenses?" he pursued. "If Barlow's ship should attack, or his men on the ground, have we weapons to hold them off?"

SADLY Atlantis shook her head. "There are two dozen men of our group here at the observatory now—astronomers, engineers, and members of the League council. Dr. Winston called them in a secret meeting here to inform them about a recent discovery of his."

Her white face looked grave as she mentioned the doctor's discovery.

"But we have no weapons," she went on. "We can't hold out against the Black Star. The extremist element of the party has been wanting for years to wipe us out. Clayton restrained them only, I think, because of his old friendship for me. That was one of the arguments Barlow used in getting recruits for his plot."

She shrugged unhappily, yet her lovely red lips did not tremble.

"I don't see what we can do," she concluded. "Barlow and his extremists will doubtless order an attack on us at once. Admiral Gluck can destroy the observatory and all of

us with one rocket load of bombs."

"Admiral Gluck?" Shane repeated. "Is he in on the plot?"

"I don't think so. Our friends in the Black Star party are certain he knew nothing about it. He is loyal to the party. If orders come to him, stamped with the Black Star seal, he will obey them without question. Barlow will order him to attack the observatory, and he will do so promptly."

Shane grinned. He caught the girl's arms, pulled her to him, and set a kiss on her startled face. His triumphant whoop was checked by the pain in his raw throat.

"Then we're all right, beautiful!" he croaked breathlessly. He liked that word of Clayton's—for Atlantis Lee. "We'll just send an order to Admiral Gluck—and have Barlow and his gang taken care of for the traitors they are."

He slipped the massive ring off his finger, pressed the tiny stud to uncover the black, scintillating star-shaped jewel. He waved it under her eyes.

"There it is. I've still got the seal!"

Her violet eyes failed to light with his own elation. Her white face smiled a little, but it still seemed tense with dread. The shadow of fear was still dark in her eyes.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Do you think Barlow will attack before we have time to send an order to Admiral Gluck?"

"That's possible," she admitted. "Barlow and his men must be desperate. They will do everything they can without any delay. We might be betrayed by others in the plot that we don't know of. But there's something else, something much more serious."

Shane caught his breath.

"I thought there must be something," he whispered. "You look so pale and anxious." He caught her hand and found it cold. "Tell me what's wrong."

Her red head turned away.

"If you feel able to stand some dreadful news," she said. "I told you Dr. Winston had made an important discovery. I called our group together to hear about it. He is going to make his announcement in a few minutes."

"What is it?" asked Shane.

"I'll let Dr. Winston tell you."

Her voice was hushed and ominous. "When you've heard it, the Black Star and Captain Barlow's plots won't matter very much."

XVIII

Mad Moon

SHANE was rapidly recovering from his ordeal Outside. Atlantis Lee wanted to take his arm, but he walked without her aid into the small lecture room where two dozen scientists and engineers—the chief opposition of the Black Star—were waiting for Dr. Winston's portentous announcement.

Atlantis introduced him before they sat down.

"This is Captain Clayton, just back from America."

Quick hostility flashed on several faces.

"We don't want a Black Star leader here!" a spectacled man said angrily.

"Captain Clayton's viewpoint changed after his recent visit inside the Barrier," the girl said. "He is now a friend of America and one of us."

"That's right," Shane added in his hoarse, painful voice. "I'm going to try to use my power in the Black Star to prevent any attack on America or on any of you. But I have enemies in the Black Star. Miss Lee has just saved my life. There will be trouble."

A bearded man shook his head.

"You don't know how much trouble, Clayton, until you have listened to Dr. Winston."

An ominous, expectant silence settled over the room as a tall, gray-faced man came through a door behind the speaker's platform. He looked over the room with troubled, preoccupied eyes.

"Dr. Winston," Atlantis Lee breathed.

The tall man cleared his throat and his pale, nervous hands took metal foil documents out of a briefcase. In a low, grave voice, he began simply:

"Thank you for coming here. A few of you have received some hints about this discovery, but I waited, before making any formal announcement, until two of my associates had checked my work. The check has just been completed. There is no escape from the truth."

A breathless stir swept the room. Somebody made a little stifled outcry. One man rose and stalked out silently, white-faced.

"Go on," Shane whispered hoarsely.

"A few days ago," resumed the tall astronomer, "our larger telescope picked up a new object in the southern sky—almost in the same position where the passing Dwarf vanished, two hundred years ago, after it had stripped off the air and the seas of Earth. On observation, it proved to be no ordinary comet. It is a solid object of almost planetary size.

"Although the astronomers of the time had stated that the return of the Dwarf was impossible, we supposed for a time that their observations had been in error. We thought that the Dwarf was coming back! That is the report that some of you have heard. It was very alarming because the object is heading directly toward an intersection of the Earth's orbit.

"It will reach the point of intersection at exactly the same time Earth does. That means collision! Last night, studying the object, I made another discovery. Apparently the observations of the old astronomers were correct, after all. The approaching body is not the Dwarf."

EXCITEMENT swept the little room again. Half the men were on their feet. Shane swayed upright, leaning on the desk in front of him.

"Then what is it?" somebody shouted. "Was it all a mistake about the collision?"

The lean astronomer put out his hand, and breathless silence fell.

"It isn't the Dwarf," his low voice repeated. "It's the moon, the Earth's old satellite which followed the Dwarf into space. Evidently it was drawn into a very long cometary orbit, but it escaped the Dwarf's attraction in the end. It is still a part of the solar system. Now, after two hundred years, it is coming back to perihelion."

"What about the collision?" Shane rasped.

"That doesn't alter our other observations," Winston said. "The moon is moving toward collision with the Earth. It isn't as heavy as the Dwarf, of course, but that will make no difference to Earth. The impact will destroy everything alive—inside the Barrier or Outside."

"How much time have we?"

"Here are my figures," Winston's gray, nervous hand held up a sheaf of pages. "You may go over them if you like. They indicate that the collision will take place in twenty-two days."

Most of the men in the room sat motionless in stunned silence. One kept repeating that last phrase under his breath:

"Twenty-two days . . . twenty-two days!"

One made aimless scrawls on a metal foil sheet. Another rose and

bolted through the door, as if the little room had suddenly become a deadly trap.

Shane went swaying down the aisle to the table where Winston stood. He waved aside the metal foil documents. His painful voice rasped the question, "What are you going to do about it?"

The spare astronomer shook his gray-streaked head.

"What can we do?" His lean shoulders shrugged. "If we had years of time, it might have been possible to outfit expeditions to colonize Mars or Venus. Our rockets have never reached such distances, but now there's no time for anything, not even that."

Other men came up with questions. Shane took the sheets of gray foil and began to thumb through them.

Beside him, Atlantis Lee spoke softly.

"Dr. Winston is our best scientist. When he gives up, it means that we are beaten. New Britain can't do anything to avert this disaster." Her voice dropped to an urgent whisper. "Barry Shane, can America help?"

BARRY looked up from the gray metal sheets, stared into her troubled violet eyes.

"I'm sure America could do nothing alone," he said hoarsely. "But I was just wondering—"

With brow furrowed, he looked again at Winston's calculations. Softly the girl prompted him.

"Wondering what, Barry?"

"New Britain can do nothing," he said. "I'm sure America couldn't for want of power and industrial organization. But I was wondering what we could both do together."

Her eyes lit with eagerness. "You have a plan?"

"Not a plan yet." He glanced at the gray sheets again. "Tell me, could one of your rockets go out to meet the moon, say, at a distance of

a few million miles?"

"I suppose so." Her tense fingers caught his arms. "Tell me, Barry, have you found a way?"

"I don't know," he whispered. "Let me ask a question." His husky voice called to lean Dr. Winston. "Suppose that the moon could be cut off from all gravitational forces for the last few million miles of its approach, what would be the result?"

The astronomer's thin face grew sardonic.

"If it could!" he repeated with unhidden irony.

"Please, Dr. Winston," Atlantis Lee said urgently. "This is serious."

Winston looked keenly at Shane. "Nobody can cut off gravitational forces," he said. "But if you want a serious reply to a fantastic question, of course, the curve of the moon's orbit would straighten. It would no longer be drawn toward the sun. Consequently it would pass outside the Earth's orbit."

"How far outside?" demanded Shane.

"That depends on how long you imagine it to be cut off."

"Suppose it would be done in ten days, would the collision be averted?"

Impatiently Winston scrawled symbols on his metal sheets.

"By a narrow margin, it would." Suddenly he moved toward Shane, and his gray eyes were piercingly intent. In a new, breathless voice, he blurted:

"Is there a way to cut off gravity?"

"It might be done," said Barry Shane, "if America and the Outside work together."

At that moment, a lean, freckled youth with tangled red hair came running into the room. He was breathing fast and he looked excited.

"That's Tony," Atlantis Lee told Shane. "My brother. He's the one who helped me get you out of the vacuum cell. He has been on watch in the communications turret above

in case Barlow tried anything." She called, "What is it, Tony?"

The panting boy thrust a trembling scrap of metal foil into her hands.

"A radio message!" he gasped. "Picked it up two hours ago, just before sunrise. Didn't know it was important till I got it decoded. Read it, Lan!"

The girl's clear voice read aloud:

"Urgent and confidential. Captain Barlow, patrol rocket *Avenger*, to Admiral Gluck, war rocket *Nemesis*. Open rebellion against Black Star. Revolt headed by Atlantis Lee, headquarters in Lee Observatory. Dr. Winston spreading unrest with propaganda rumors of danger from space. Rebels have been joined by man claiming to be Captain Glenn Clayton. Have evidence this man is impostor and traitor to Black Star. He does not possess Black Star seal, as previously rumored. I urge immediate attack on observatory before rebels can undermine Black Star authority with propaganda lies of approaching cataclysm."

Shane felt cold and weak, as if the stark chill of the Outside were still in his blood. This was a cleverer blow than he had expected. His clammy hands clutched the edge of the battered lecture table. It was hard to think of anything to do.

"Can you take me to the radio?" he asked. "I want to talk to Admiral Gluck."

He knew he had to communicate with Gluck, but it was hard to think of what to say.

"Sure, Captain." Tony Lee's blue eyes were shining. He seemed completely unafraid. "We can try, but the sun is up now, and radio won't reach very far. Barlow's message came just in time to reach the relay stations. Now the solar interference has shut down."

"We must try!" Shane insisted.

He followed the boy up a circular metal stairway into the communica-

tions turret. Evidently this was Tony Lee's domain, for the metal walls were decorated with model rockets. Observation ports looked out in every direction upon dead black mountains that had never seen the sun until the Dwarf came, upon the gray disk of New Dover and the smaller domes around it.

Confidently the boy twisted the dials.

"Lee Observatory, calling Rocket *Nemesis*!" he chanted into the microphone. "Captain Glenn Clayton, calling Admiral Gluck—"

His breathless voice broke off as the floor pitched and jerked. Shattering glass crashed somewhere. A great mushroom of white vapor grew up beside the observatory.

Black fragments of rock hurtled out of it. Debris rang against the observatory dome.

The boy's eyes were still shining, and he didn't seem afraid. He knew that his world had only days to live. Death clanged and rattled incessantly against the metal dome, yet his voice was low and calm.

"That was a rocket-bomb, Captain. The fleet must be above us now, but maybe they can't hear. The sun plays queer tricks with radio."

XIX

Ring Around the World

THE hail of bomb splinters and rocky debris ceased. In the narrow little communications turret, above the observatory dome, Barry Shane turned to Atlantis Lee's red-haired brother.

"Try again, Tony. Get me the admiral."

Excited but unafraid, the boy went back to his dials.

"Lee Observatory," he calmly resumed his chant, "calling Rocket

Nemesis. Captain Glenn Clayton, calling Admiral Gluck—"

Barry Shane watched the dark sky. A glance toward the low sun dazzled him. He couldn't find the rocket fleet. Admiral Gluck's shrill voice startled him.

"Hello, Clayton." It rose and fell on a sea of hissing static. "Will you surrender the observatory and submit to a party trial on the charges of treason that have been made against you? Or do you want another and bigger bomb?"

Shane swallowed to clear his husky throat.

"I refuse to surrender," he rapped in Clayton's hard tones. "I am not a traitor. The real traitors are Barlow and his henchmen. I have let them show their hand."

Upon the roaring static, Gluck's sharp voice seemed uncertain.

"Can you explain your dealings with the enemies of the Black Star?"

"I can explain whatever I like." Shane tried to speak curtly like the Black Star leader. "Send a ship to pick up a confidential message. It will be stamped with the Black Star seal."

On the rushing static, Gluck's thin voice audibly faltered.

"The seal? But Barlow informed me— A ship will be sent at once, sir."

Atlantis Lee helped him compose the message and typed it on a sheet of gray metal foil. Shane stamped it with the scintillating crystal star in Clayton's ring.

A grave emergency exists. The attack on the Barrier must be abandoned. The fleet and all the resources of the Black Star will be placed at Capt. Clayton's disposal for the task of averting disaster. With your own telescopes, you can confirm Dr. Winston's discovery that the moon is coming back toward collision with Earth. When you have done that, come with your staff to the Lee Observatory.

A gray war rocket dropped on an angular landing stanchion at the

edge of the new bomb crater beside the observatory. Tony Lee, wearing an air-suit and waving a black flag, carried the message to its valve.

A long hour passed. Shane talked a little to Atlantis Lee. She was as unfrightened as her brother. Shane suddenly knew that he loved her, but it was impossible to speak of love when the shadow of disaster hung over Earth.

TWO rockets dropped beside the observatory — Gluck's *Nemesis* and Barlow's *Avenger*. A dozen men came through the air-lock into the observatory. Shane met them. The fierce, yellow-mustached little admiral was tense and suspicious. Barlow's sullen face looked uneasy, defiant.

"You check Dr. Winston's discovery?" asked Shane.

"There is a strange object in the south," Gluck's small, shrewd eyes were piercing. "But your behavior has been suspicious, Clayton. Grave charges have been made against you. I am here only because I must obey the commands of the Black Star."

"Dr. Winston is waiting in the lecture room," Shane told him. "I want you to listen to him. Check his work all you like. Convince yourselves that the danger is real. Then we'll talk about what to do."

Scowling ferociously, Barlow pointed a thick finger at Shane. "Admiral, don't trust this man! This looks like a trap. Are you going to walk into it? This man's dealings with the known enemies of the Black Star are obvious treason. Why don't you arrest him?"

The little admiral did not take his probing eyes off Shane.

"The Black Star," he repeated, "commanded me to come here."

Barlow stepped forward, one hairy hand trembling near the gun at his hip. His broad face held a look of leering triumph.

"Admiral, look at this man!" his

thin voice rasped. "Is he Captain Clayton? Is he our real leader? I have evidence that he is not. When he came back from America, he didn't even know where Clayton lived in New Dover!"

A blunt finger jabbed.

"Look at him! You can see he's a different man. His hair is a little too dark, and he's a little too small. See, Clayton's clothing doesn't quite fit. Look—" Barlow stepped closer, his voice grew harsh with excitement. "Look at the scars on his face. I hadn't noticed them before, but they are the scars of plastic surgery!" He drew his gun as he finished triumphantly. "This man is just a copy of Clayton!"

Shane grinned Clayton's hard grin.

"Better put up your gun," he advised Barlow. He turned to Gluck. "Admiral, I want you to listen to Dr. Winston. Then I have something to tell you."

"Wait, Admiral!" yelled Barlow. "Are you going to allow this impostor—"

"The Black Star's command," Gluck shrieked. "Put up your gun, Barlow."

An hour later, when they came out of Winston's lecture room, the little admiral and his staff looked shaken and pale. Even Barlow appeared subdued, and his pale, thick lips kept moving.

"Twenty-two days!" he whispered. "Only twenty-two days!"

With Clayton's hard voice, Shane rapped at Gluck.

"Admiral, are you convinced of the danger?"

The stern little man tugged fiercely at his yellow mustache.

"I am convinced." His thin voice was husky and quavering. "I have checked everything. It is more than a danger. It is a sentence of doom." Medals tinkled as he shrugged hopelessly. "What were you going to tell me, Captain? What can the Black

Star do?"

"The Black Star can do nothing alone," Shane said gravely. "But I believe that all of us, working together, have a chance." With a hard grin at Barlow, he confessed, "It's true that I'm not Captain Clayton."

The shaken men merely stared at him.

"I'm Barry Shane, an American." Before the officer's startled gaze, he slipped Clayton's ring from his finger and snapped open the bezel to show the glittering star-shaped crystal. Barlow made a gasping sound, as if of rage and pain. Grinning at him, Shane gave the ring to Gluck.

"The Black Star seal," he told the astonished admiral. "I don't need it any longer. Will you keep it in trust for the party?"

A STERN pride lit Gluck's thin old face. The suspicion vanished from his shrewd eyes. He put the ring on a gnarled finger of his right hand and looked dazedly at Shane.

"You are an American," he quavered hopefully. "You know the science that created the Barrier." He paused and his keen eyes probed Shane's. "Do you know how to stop the moon?"

"It can't be stopped," Shane admitted without hesitation. "But there is a way to turn it a little aside—if we can get there with the necessary equipment in time."

"How?" demanded the admiral.

"If sufficient power is used," Shane explained, "the space-warp wall created by an ultra-electronic tube can be made opaque to gravitation. We must set up a new Barrier around the moon to cut it off from the sun's gravitation. That will change its path enough, if we can do it in time, to make it miss the Earth."

"But we have no Barrier tube," objected Gluck.

"There's a spare tube in America, in the Ring Cylinder," Shane told

him. "Remember, the war is over. It will take the united efforts of all of us to avert destruction. The Americans couldn't do anything alone. They haven't the ships to reach the moon or the gold-film cells to supply the tremendous power that will be required. But America can supply the tube."

Admiral Gluck tugged doubtfully at his yellow mustache. He wasn't used to the idea of America as an ally.

Two days later the *Nemesis* landed at Ring City. Shane introduced the little admiral to General Whitehall. The bulky crates that contained the parts of the spare ultradyne tube were loaded without delay.

"The tube wasn't designed for a gravitational shield," Whitehall warned Shane. "You will have to overload it about a hundred times. I don't know how long it will hold out—perhaps a few minutes, perhaps long enough. If we only had time to build another—"

But there was no time.

The *Nemesis* flashed out through the Ring again to overtake the rocket fleet already bound for the moon, loaded with gold-film cells. After six days the fleet reached the returning satellite. The long cylinders dropped to form a ring on the craggy floor of the vast ice-crater.

WITH a crew of men in air-suits, Barry Shane assembled the tube in the center of that ring. The six-armed tube was shaped somewhat like one of the pick-up toys called jacks that young girls still played with. But it rose seventy feet high, hung in a steel tower. Thick cables connected it to the power rooms of the rockets ringed about it.

At last, after sixty sleepless hours, the job was finished. Reeling with weariness, Shane gave a signal. A river of power came through the cables from the ships. The transparent quartz arms of the great tube

glowed faintly green.

Over the cragged ice-peaks of the wild moonscape, the dark splendor of space appeared unchanged. The Earth was like another strange moon—brown and bare, except for the sharp-edged greenish circle of America inside the Ring. Not even a flicker passed across that dark, strange sky.

Presently a signal came from the navigation room of the *Nemesis*. The moon had ceased its slow curve toward the sun—and toward collision with Earth. The tube worked!

But would it burn out?

Weary as he was, Shane couldn't take his eyes off that pale green glow in the great arms that now meant the chance of the world to survive. It remained steady for minute after minute, hour after hour, until Shane went to sleep on his feet.

Anxious days went by. The brown, barren Earth grew vaster in the heavens, and still the overloaded tube endured. The moon reached the point of closest approach. The desolate Earth filled the lunar sky. In a few more hours the moon would have been safely past.

But the reaction of Earth's gravitational stresses increased the overload. The tube flickered and went dark. The invisible gravity wall was gone. The terrific power of gravitation reached the passing satellite and shattered it. Cataclysmic moonquakes tossed the ice-plain where the rocket fleet had landed. The dead tube was swallowed in a new crevasse.

The rockets fled from the doomed satellite through space already dangerous with flying ice.

Aboard the *Nemesis*, Barry Shane watched that display of cosmic fury, his heart cold with apprehension for the safety of violet-eyed Atlantis Lee, back in New Dover. What would happen to the dome-city under the fragments of the shattered ice-world?

Even in his concern, he realized that the spectacle had an awesome beauty. The moon's cragged face melted into white chaos. Two long plumes of white reached out. Slowly, as the hours passed, they stretched into a white and shining double ring about the dead brown Earth. The moon's rocky core hurtled onward into space.

Finally, then, the hail of ice fragments reached the naked brown Earth. The heat of impact turned them into expanding steam. The barren planet was splotted with white. The splotches grew and ran together, until the planet's face was veiled in white.

Only the misty greenish circle over North America remained unchanged. Under the shelter of the Ring, America had escaped all harm, but white clouds hid the fate of the cities of New Britain in the unprotected, exposed Outside.

Despairing for Atlantis Lee's life, Barry Shane found it difficult to live up to the hard, cynical grin he had so willingly assumed.

XX

Gateway to Paradise

A MAN and a woman, alone in a broken machine on the dead, dry, skeleton-strewn waste where once the sea had been, waited for the end of the world. Under the skillful care of Della Rand, Clayton recovered from the effects of the bullet she had fired. He continued his observations of the approaching object in the southern sky and found it was not the returning Dwarf.

It was Earth's old, lost moon, but that fact seemed to make no difference. Night by night the returning satellite loomed larger and larger and more ominous in the circular

screen of the powerful electronic telescope. Clayton also watched the sky for the ion-glow of any passing rocket.

"I'm going to signal a ship," he told Della, "whenever one comes in sight. The ship's lights should attract attention if we open all the shutters and wink them."

Della's gaze was searching, almost hostile.

"Why?" she demanded, her voice cold with scorn. "Do you want to go back, to rejoin your friends in the Black Star? Do you want to expose Barry Shane and start a new attack on the Ring?"

Clayton laughed and put his arm around her.

"Are you trying to start a fight, beautiful?"

"I won't let you go back if that's what you want to do!"

"Forgive me, darling," he said, his face grave and oddly tender. "I don't blame you for thinking that about me. I've given you cause enough. But things are different now, beautiful. You've made them different."

Wonderingly she scrutinized his features. He smiled back at her—a little smile that seemed strangely abashed and diffident. The hard, reckless glint in his green eyes had vanished, grown soft.

She waited bewilderedly, silent in his arms.

"I remember something I read in an old book," he said slowly, "one of the few books that were saved after the Dwarf passed. It said something about the gateway to paradise. We in the Black Star have been knocking on the wrong gate. You've helped me find the right one, beautiful."

His arms drew her closer, and he kissed her gently.

"I want to go back and help Barry Shane," he continued. "The trap was waiting for him. I knew that Barlow had already set it. It was amusing to let Shane walk into it—amusing,

then, because you hadn't shown me the proper gate. I suppose it won't make any difference in the end, but I'd like to do what I can to repair a little of the harm I've done. Besides—"

He laughed, and the old, hard glint came back into his eyes.

"Besides," he repeated, "if Captain Barlow has already sprung his trap, I'd like to see him face to face with the ghost of the man he murdered!"

"I wonder—have you really changed?" whispered Della Rand.

They watched the dark skies for a rocket's passing glare, but no ship passed. Slow disappointment grew upon Clayton's face.

"There seem to be no patrol flights any more," he said at last. "Gluck must have moved the fleet from Point Fourteen." He grinned at her. "I guess we'll see the end together, after all, beautiful."

"I'm glad," she whispered in his arms.

Night by night they watched the moon.

Growing on the telescope screen, it showed a face that Earth had never seen before. But the other side of the moon was only another crater-pitted wilderness of jagged, glaring ice.

"Just another snowball, beautiful!"

Clayton grinned at Della Rand, and his hard green eyes seemed unafraid.

"How is that?" she breathed.

"That's all the old explorers found, two hundred years ago." He adjusted the instrument, and the moon's cruel white features grew upon the screen. "Just a hard snowball, molded on a core of rock. A cosmic prank on the human race!"

A DAY came when the telescope was no longer necessary. The terrible moon grew larger than the sun. Its savage ice-mountains were

visible to the unaided eye. Della Rand thought they were like the spikes in some ancient war-club, glimpsed by a victim as the weapon descended.

Dread created numbness in her brain. She tried to find small tasks about their cramped quarters in the disabled *Friendship* to occupy her mind, but all the business of life had lost its meaning now. She was glad to be with Clayton, yet all her love seemed always to turn into fear of the moment when he would be gone with all the doomed world. She looked up dully as he came into the galley.

His brown face looked perplexed. For once, he seemed too disturbed to grin.

"I said it was all a joke. Now the moon is playing another prank. It has left its orbit!"

Her dark eyes went black, staring at him. Her strong, slender hands caught suddenly at her throat. The pang of hope was more painful than despair had been.

"What do you mean?" she gasped.

Clayton recovered his grin.

"The moon isn't following quite the orbit I predicted," he told her, "though the difference isn't great. An error, I suppose, in my calculations. I can't figure it out. I checked them a dozen times."

"Will it miss us?" she whispered anxiously.

He shrugged. "Too soon to say, beautiful. Not much, at the best. Just a graze, perhaps, instead of the center shot I predicted. Probably not enough to make any difference." His hard fingers caught her trembling arm, and she found comfort in his strength. "Want to have a look?"

Hour by hour the moon expanded, until it blotted out the stars. Its rays flooded the dead sea-floor with a cold, strange radiance. Its awesome, mountainous disk became the only reality.

Della Rand tried not to look at it.

Again and again she left the ports to begin some useless task of sweeping—setting their quarters in order. But always the appalling spectacle drew her back unwillingly.

Clayton seemed scarcely disturbed. He grinned at her visible apprehension. Sometimes it seemed to her that he felt a strange elation on this terrifying spectacle of cosmic catastrophe.

She fixed a tray of food in the little galley and brought it to him, but of course, neither of them could eat. He finished a new set of observations, and his calm brown fingers solved one more problem on the calculator.

"What—" Della gulped. "What have you found?"

"Things are going to be interesting, beautiful." His green eyes held the old reckless glint. "It's going to miss us but not by very much. It's going to pass inside the critical distance of four radii."

"What does that mean?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," he replied. "Theory says the moon should be broken up by tidal stresses, inside the critical distance. The rocky core might go on past, but I imagine most of the ice will be peeled off it. I think we're going to have a hail-storm, beautiful—a hail-storm like none there ever was before." He swept her into his hard arms and kissed her. "Whatever happens, things are going to be interesting."

They watched the end of a world.

HUGE beyond imagination, cruel with mountain-fangs of glaring ice, the moon filled the southward sky. The battle of cosmic energies made a spectacle such as man had never seen. Della felt numb and ill with dread, but Clayton's greenish eyes were bright, and his hard brown face had a faint, eager smile.

Ice-cragg shattered on the moon. Tidal strains ripped new black fis-

tures across the craters, wider and longer than the snow-filled cracks that once had spread their mysterious web from the meteor-shattered crater named Tycho.

The moon dissolved into white chaos. The stricken satellite shuddered and spun. Gleaming plumes of debris were flung across the sky's black face, yet the cataclysm had the stately deliberation fitting to a planet's death.

It was like a picture in slow motion. Time was suspended. Eyes ached and necks were cramped and still the watchers dared not look away, for no man had ever seen the death of a world.

They had lost track of time. Hours must have passed. The rays of the rising sun picked out the first jagged fragment of the shattered world falling near them. Clayton pointed and caught Della's cold hand.

They watched silently. The cragged missile struck a distant line of dead brown hills. The dry ocean-bed rocked to the impact. Della's forgotten tray of dishes fell and shattered on the floor. Steam exploded from the point of impact. White vapor filled the sky and veiled the crumbling moon.

"Now what will happen?" Della's cold hand was tense in Clayton's. "To the Earth?" Her dark eyes searched his face anxiously. "And to us?"

"Too soon to say, beautiful, we'll have to wait and see."

IT WAS two days before the ice-battered fleet could return to the white-ringed Earth. By that time the clouds had begun to clear from the lake-jeweled uplands. Still a soft haze veiled the brown mountains that had been so stark and bare.

"That's more than water-vapor," Shane told Admiral Gluck. "The moon must have caught a part of our lost air as it was drawn between Earth and the Dwarf. Just a frac-

tion, of course, but it might be fairly dense in the old sea-bottoms."

The watch-officer of the *Nemesis* caught a flashing signal light. Dropping to investigate, the rocket found the jagged brown hull of the disguised *Friendship* lying on the shore of a new shallow sea.

Della Rand and Clayton came running hand in hand to greet their rescuers. They were breathing fast in the thin air, but they needed no air-suits.

Clayton met Shane with a hard, green-eyed grin.

"Congratulations, Captain Clayton," Clayton said. "Good work! You can keep the name if you like. I have something else." He looked at the dark-eyed girl, and the hardness went out of his grin. "We've found something else," he repeated softly. "I have found a gateway, and Della has found a dream."

Shane grinned back.

"I'm not using the name. Thanks, anyhow."

Two hours later, the rocket dropped through the thinning white ceiling over New Dover. Now the gray dome-city stood upon the end of a long, rugged headland. A new sea washed the black cliffs beneath it.

The *Nemesis* landed upon the level top of the dome. The city was unharmed, for the returning atmosphere had cushioned Earth from the hail of icy debris. A cheering crowd surrounded the battered rocket. Shane glimpsed the bare red head of Atlantis Lee and he went to find her.

"Barry!" she called to him.

The sky had cleared and across it soared the white eternal arch of the ring around the Earth. It was man's own arch of victory in a battle with the cosmos.

"See, Barry!" Atlantis Lee turned gently in Shane's hard arms and pointed to the soaring pillars of the double ring. "Aren't they like a splendid gateway?"

By ISAAC ASIMOV



Christmas on Ganymede

Playing Santa Claus is no cinch on this planet!

OLAF JOHNSON hummed nasally to himself and his china-blue eyes were dreamy as he surveyed the stately fir tree in the corner of the library. Though the library was the largest single room in the Dome, Olaf felt it none too spacious for the occasion. Enthusiasti-

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cally he dipped into the huge crate at his side and took out the first roll of red-and-green crêpe paper.

What sudden burst of sentiment had inspired the Ganymedan Products Corporation, Inc., to ship a complete collection of Christmas decorations to the Dome, he did not pause to inquire. Olaf's was a placid disposition, and in his self-imposed job as chief Christmas decorator, he was content with his lot.

He frowned suddenly and muttered a curse. The General's Assembly signal light was flashing on and off hysterically. With an injured air Olaf laid down the tack-hammer he had just lifted, then the roll of crêpe paper, picked some tinsel out of his hair and left for officers' quarters.

Commander Scott Pelham was in his deep armchair at the head of the table when Olaf entered. His stubby fingers were drumming un rhythmically upon the glass-topped table. Olaf met the commander's furious eyes without fear, for nothing had gone wrong in his department in twenty Ganymedan revolutions.

The room filled rapidly with men, and Pelham's eyes hardened as he counted noses in one sweeping glance.

"We're all here. Men, we face a crisis!"

There was a vague stir. Olaf's eyes sought the ceiling and he relaxed. Crises hit the Dome once a revolution, on the average. Usually they turned out to be a sudden rise in the quota of oxide to be gathered, or the inferior quality of the last batch of karen leaves. He stiffened, however, at the next words.

"In connection with the crisis, I have one question to ask," Pelham's voice was a deep baritone, and it rasped unpleasantly when he was angry. "What dirty imbecile trouble-maker has been telling those blasted Ossies fairy tales?"

Olaf cleared his throat nervously and thus immediately became the

center of attention. His Adam's apple wobbled in sudden alarm and his forehead wrinkled into a washboard. He shivered.

"I—I—" he stuttered, quickly fell silent. His long fingers made a bewildered gesture of appeal. "I mean I was out there yesterday, after the last—uh—supplies of karen leaves, on account the Ossies were slow and—"

A deceptive sweetness entered Pelham's voice. He smiled.

"Did you tell those natives about Santa Claus, Olaf?"

THE smile looked uncommonly like a wolfish leer and Olaf broke down. He nodded convulsively.

"Oh, you did? Well, you told them about Santa Claus! He comes down in a sleigh that flies through the air with eight reindeer pulling it, huh?"

"Well—er—doesn't he?" Olaf asked unhappily.

"And you drew pictures of the reindeer, just to make sure there was no mistake. Also, he has a long white beard and red clothes with white trimmings."

"Yeah, that's right," said Olaf, his face puzzled.

"And he has a big bag, chock full of presents for good little boys and girls, and he brings it down the chimney and puts presents inside stockings."

"Sure."

"You also told them he's about due, didn't you? One more revolution and he's going to visit us."

Olaf smiled weakly. "Yeah, Commander, I meant to tell you. I'm fixing up the tree and—"

"Shut up!" The commander was breathing hard in a whistling sort of way. "Do you know what those Ossies have thought of?"

"No, Commander."

Pelham leaned across the table toward Olaf and shouted: "They want Santa Claus to visit them!"

Someone laughed and changed it quickly into a strangling cough at the commander's raging stare.

"And if Santa Claus doesn't visit them, the Ossies are going to quit work!" He repeated: "Quit cold—strike!"

There was no laughter, strangled or otherwise, after that. If there was more than one thought among the entire group, it didn't show itself. Olaf expressed that thought:

"But what about the quota?"

"Well, what about it?" snarled Pelham. "Do I have to draw pictures for you? Gandymedan Products has to get one hundred tons of wolfram-mite, eighty tons of karen leaves and fifty tons of oxite every year, or it loses its franchise. I suppose there isn't anyone here who doesn't know that. It so happens that the current year ends in two Ganymedan revolutions, and we're five per cent behind schedule as it is."

There was horrified silence.

"And now the Ossies won't work unless they get Santa Claus. No work, no quota, no franchise—no jobs! Get that, you low-grade morons. When the company loses its franchise, we lose the best-paying jobs in the System. Kiss them good-bye, men, unless—"

HE PAUSED, glared steadily at Olaf, and added:

"Unless, by next revolution, we have a flying sleigh, eight reindeer and a Santa Claus. And by every cosmic speck in the rings of Saturn, we're going to have just that, especially a Santa!"

Ten faces turned ghastly pale.

"Got anybody in mind, Commander?" asked someone in a voice that was three-quarters croak.

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I have."

He sprawled back in his chair. Olaf Johnson broke into a sudden sweat as he found himself staring at the end of a pointing forefinger.

"Aw, Commander!" he quavered.

But the pointing finger never moved.

PELHAM tramped into the fore-room, removed his oxygen nose-piece and the cold cylinders attached to it. One by one he cast off thick woolen outer garments and, with a final, weary sigh, jerked off a pair of heavy knee-high space boots.

Sim Pierce paused in his careful inspection of the latest batch of karen leaves and cast a hopeful glance over his spectacles.

"Well?" he asked.

Pelham shrugged. "I promised them Santa. What else could I do? I also doubled sugar rations, so they're back on the job—for the moment."

"You mean till the Santa we promised doesn't show up." Pierce straightened and waved a long karen leaf at the commander's face for emphasis. "This is the silliest thing I ever heard of. It can't be done. There ain't no Santa Claus!"

"Try telling that to the Ossies." Pelham slumped into a chair and his expression became stonily bleak. "What's Benson doing?"

"You mean that flying sleigh he says he can rig up?" Pierce held a leaf up to the light and peered at it critically. "He's a crackpot, if you ask me. The old buzzard went down to the sub-level this morning and he's been there ever since. All I know is that he's taken the spare lectro-dissociator apart. If anything happens to the regular, it just means that we're without oxygen."

"Well," Pelham rose heavily, "for my part I hope we do choke. It would be an easy way out of this whole mess. I'm going down below."

He stomped out and slammed the door behind him.

In the sub-level he gazed about in bewilderment, for the room was littered with gleaming chrome-steel machine parts. It took him some time to recognize the mess as the

remains of what had been a compact, snugly built lectro-dissociator the day before. In the center, in anachronistic contract, stood a dusty wooden sleigh atop rusted runners. From beneath it came the sound of hammering.

"Hey, Benton!" called Pelham.

A grimy, sweat-streaked face pushed out from underneath the sleigh, and a stream of tobacco juice shot toward Benson's ever-present cuspidor.

"What are you shouting like that for?" he complained. "This is delicate work."

"What the devil is that weird contraption?" demanded Pelham.

"Flying sleigh. My own idea, too." The light of enthusiasm shone in Benson's watery eyes, and the quid in his mouth shifted from cheek to cheek as he spoke. "The sleigh was brought here in the old days, when they thought Ganymede was covered with snow like the other Jovian moons. All I have to do is fix a few gravo-repulsors from the dissociator to the bottom and that'll make it weightless when the current's on. Compressed air-jets will do the rest."

The commander chewed his lower lip dubiously.

"Will it work?"

"Sure it will. Lots of people have thought of using repulsors in air travel, but they're inefficient, especially in heavy gravity fields. Here on Ganymede, with a field of one-third gravity and a thin atmosphere, a child could run it. Even Johnson could run it, though I wouldn't mourn if he fell off and broke his blasted neck.

"All right, then, look here. We've got lots of this native purplewood. Get Charlie Finn and tell him to put that sleigh on a platform of it. He's to have it extend about twenty feet or more frontward, with a railing around the part that projects."

Benson spat and scowled through the stringy hair over his eyes.

"What's the idea, Commander?"

Pelham's laughter came in short, harsh barks.

"Those Ossies are expecting reindeer, and reindeer they're going to have. Those animals will have to stand on something, won't they?"

"Sure . . . but wait, hold on! There aren't any reindeer on Ganymede."

Commander Pelham paused on his way out. His eyes narrowed unpleasantly as they always did when he thought of Olaf Johnson.

"Olaf is out rounding up eight spinybacks for us. They've got four feet, a head on one end and a tail on the other. That's close enough for the Ossies."

The old engineer chewed this information and chuckled nastily.

"Good! I wish the fool joy of his job."

"So do I," gritted Pelham.

He stalked out as Benson, still leering, slid underneath the sleigh.

THE commander's description of a spinyback was concise and accurate, but it left out several interesting details. For one thing, a spinyback has a long, mobile snout, two large ears that wave back and forth gently, and two emotional purple eyes. The males have pliable spines of a deep crimson color along the backbone that seem to delight the female of the species. Combine these with a scaly, muscular tail and a brain by no means mediocre, and you have a spinyback—or at least you have one if you can catch him.

It was just such a thought that occurred to Olaf Johnson as he sneaked down from the rocky eminence toward the herd of twenty-five spinybacks grazing on the sparse, gritty undergrowth. The nearest spines looked up as Olaf, bundled in fur and grotesque with attached oxygen nose-piece, approached. However, spines have no natural enemies, so they merely gazed at the figure with languidly

disapproving eyes and returned to their crunching but nourishing fare.

Olaf's notions on bagging big game were sketchy. He fumbled in his pocket for a lump of sugar, held it out and said:

"Here, pussy, pussy, pussy, pussy, pussy!"

The ears of the nearest spinie twitched in annoyance. Olaf came closer and held out the sugar again.

"Come, bossy! Come, bossy!"

The spinie caught sight of the sugar and rolled his eyes at it. His snout twitched as he spat out his last mouthful of vegetation and ambled over. With neck stretched out, he sniffed. Then using a rapid, expert motion, he struck at the outheld palm and flipped the lump into his mouth. Olaf's other hand whistled down upon nothingness.

With a hurt expression, Olaf held out another piece.

"Here, Prince! Here, Fido!"

The spinie made a low, tremulous sound deep in his throat. It was a sound of pleasure. Evidently this strange monotony before him, having gone insane, intended to feed him these bits of concentrated succulence forever. He snatched and was back as quickly as the first time. But, since Olaf had held on firmly this time, the spinie almost bagged half a finger as well.

Olaf's yell lacked a bit of the nonchalance necessary at such times. Nevertheless, a bite that can be felt through thick gloves is a bite!

He advanced boldly upon the spinie. There are some things that stir the Johnson blood and bring up the ancient spirit of the Vikings. Having one's finger bitten, especially by an unearthly animal, is one of these.

There was an uncertain look in the spinie's eyes as he backed slowly away. There weren't any white cubes being offered any more, and he wasn't quite sure what was going to happen now. The uncertainty van-

ished with a suddenness he did not expect when two glove-muffled hands came down upon his ears and jerked. He let out a high-pitched yelp and charged forward.

A SPINIE has a certain sense of dignity, however. He doesn't like to have his ears pulled, particularly when other spinies, including several unattached females, have formed a ring and are looking on.

The Earthman went over backward and remained in that position for a while. Meantime, the spinie backed away a few feet in a gentlemanly manner and allowed Johnson to get to his feet.

The old Viking blood frothed still higher in Olaf. After rubbing the hurt spot where he had landed on his oxygen cylinder, he jumped, forgetting to allow for Ganymedan gravity. He sailed five feet over the spinie's back.

There was awe in the animal's eye as he watched Olaf, for it was a stately jump. But there was a certain amount of bewilderment as well. There seemed to be no purpose to the maneuver.

Olaf landed on his back again and got the cylinder in the same place. He was beginning to feel a little embarrassed. The sounds that came from the circle of onlookers were remarkably like snickers.

"Laugh!" he muttered bitterly. "I haven't even begun to fight yet."

He approached the spinie slowly, cautiously. He circled, watching for his opening. So did the spinie. Olaf feinted and the spinie ducked. Then the spinie reared and Olaf ducked.

Olaf kept remembering new profanity all the time. The husky "Ur-r-r-r" that came out the spinie's throat seemed to lack the brotherly spirit that is usually associated with Christmas.

There was a sudden, swishing sound. Olaf felt something collide with his skull, just behind his left

ear. This time he turned a back somersault and landed on the nape of his neck.

There was a chorused whinny from the onlookers, and the spinie waved his tail triumphantly.

Olaf got rid of the impression that he was floating through a star-studded space and wavered to his feet.

"Listen," he objected, "using your tail is a foul!"

He leaped back as the tail shot forward again, then flung himself forward in a diving tackle. He grabbed at the spinie's feet and felt the animal come down on his back with an indignant yelp.

Now it was a case of Earth muscles against Ganymedan muscles, and Olaf became a man of brute strength. He struggled up, and the spinie found himself slung over the stranger's shoulders.

The spinie objected vociferously and tried to prove his objections by a judicious whip of the tail. But he was in an inconvenient position and the stroke whistled harmlessly over Olaf's head.

The other spinies made way for the Earthman with saddened expressions. Evidently they were all good friends of the captured animal and hated to see him lose a fight. They returned to their meal in philosophic resignation, plainly convinced that it was kismet.

On the other side of the rocky ledge, Olaf reached his prepared cave. There was the briefest of scrambling struggles before he managed to sit down hard on the spinie's head and put enough knots into rope to hold him there.

A few hours later, when he had corralled his eighth spinyback, he possessed the technique that comes of long practice. He could have given a Terran cowboy valuable pointers on throwing a maverick. Also, he could have given a Terran stevedore lessons in simple and compound swearing.

'Twas the night before Christmas—and all through the Ganymedan Dome there was deafening noise and bewildering excitement, like an exploding nova equipped for sound. Around the rusty sleigh, mounted on its huge platform of purplewood, five Earthmen were staging a battle royal with a spinie.

The spinie had definite views about most things, and one of his stubbornest and most definite views was that he would never go where he didn't want to go. He made that clear by flailing one head, one tail, three spines and four legs in every possible direction, with all possible force.

But the Earthmen insisted, and not gently. Despite loud, agonized squeaks, the spinie was lifted onto the platform, hauled into place and harnessed into hopeless helplessness.

"Okay!" Peter Benson yelled. "Pass the bottle."

HOLDING the spinie's snout with one hand, Benson waved the bottle under it with the other. The spinie quivered eagerly and whined tremulously. Benson poured some of the liquid down the animal's throat. There was a gurgling swallow and an appreciative whinny. The spinie's neck stretched out for more.

Benson sighed. "Our best brandy, too."

He up-ended the bottle and withdrew it half empty. The spinie, eyes whirling in their sockets rapidly, did what seemed an attempt at a gay jig. It didn't last long, however, for Ganymedan metabolism is almost immediately affected by alcohol. His muscles locked in a drunken rigor and, with a loud hiccup, he went out on his feet.

"Drag out the next!" yelled Benson.

In an hour the eight spinybacks were so many cataleptic statues. Forked sticks were tied around their heads as antlers. The effect was

crude and sketchy, but it would do.

As Benson opened his mouth to ask where Olaf Johnson was, that worthy showed up in the arms of three comrades, and he was putting up as stiff a fight as any spinie. His objections, however, were highly articulate.

"I'm not going anywhere in this damned costume!" he roared, gouging at the nearest eye. "You hear me?"

There certainly was cause for objection. Even at his best, Olaf had never been a heart-throb. But in his present condition, he resembled a hybrid between a spinie's nightmare and a Picassoan conception of a patriarch.

He wore the conventional costume of Santa. His clothes were as red as red tissue paper sewed onto his space coat could make it. The "ermine" was as white as cotton wool, which it was. His beard more cotton wool glued onto a linen foundation, hung loosely from his ears. With that below and his oxygen nosepiece above, even the strongest were forced to avert their eyes.

Olaf had not been shown a mirror. But, between what he could see of himself and what his instinct told him, he would have greeted a good, bright lightning bolt like a brother.

By fits and starts, he hauled the sleigh. Others pitched in to help, until Olaf was nothing but a smothered squirm and a muffled voice.

"Leggo," he mumbled. "Leggo and come at me one by one. Come on!"

He tried to spar a bit, to point his dare. But the multiple grips upon him left him unable to wriggle a finger.

"Get in!" ordered Benson.

"You go to hell!" gasped Olaf. "I'm not getting into any patented shortcut to suicide, and you can take your bloody flying sleigh and—"

"Listen," interrupted Benson, "Commander Pelham is waiting for you at the other end. He'll skin you

alive if you don't show up in half an hour."

"Commander Pelham can take the sleigh sideways and—"

"Then think of your job! Think of a hundred and fifty a week. Think of every other year off with pay. Think of Hilda, back on Earth, who isn't going to marry you without a job. Think of all that!"

JOHNSON thought, snarled. He thought some more, got into the sleigh, strapped down his bag and turned on the gravo-repulsors. With a horrible curse, he opened the rear jet.

The sleigh dashed forward and he caught himself from going backward, over and out of the sleigh, by two-thirds of a whisker. He held onto the sides thereafter, watching the surrounding hills as they rose and fell with each lurch of the unsteady sleigh.

As the wind rose, the undulations grew more marked. And when Jupiter came up, its yellow light brought out every jar and crag of the rocky ground, toward every one of which, in turn, the sleigh seemed headed. And by the time the giant planet had shoved completely over the horizon, the curse of drink—which departs from the Ganymedan organism just as quickly as it descends—began removing itself from the spinies.

The hindmost spinie came out of it first, tasted the inside of his mouth, winced and swore off drink. Having made that resolution, he took in his immediate surroundings languidly. They made no immediate impression on him. Only gradually was the fact forced upon him that his footing, whatever it was, was not the usual stable one of solid Ganymede. It swayed and shifted, which seemed very unusual.

Yet he might have attributed this unsteadiness to his recent orgy, had he not been so careless as to drop his glance over the railing to which

he was anchored. No spinie ever died of heart failure, as far as is recorded but, looking downward, this one almost did.

His agonized screech of horror and despair brought the other spinies into full, if headachy, consciousness. For a while there was a confused blur of squawking conversation as the animals tried to get the pain out of their heads and the facts in. Both aims were achieved and a stampede was organized. It wasn't much of a stampede, because the spinies were tightly anchored. But, except for the fact that they got nowhere, they went through all the motions of a full gallop. And the sleigh went crazy.

Olaf grabbed his beard a second before it let go of his ears.

"Hey!" he shouted.

It was akin to saying, "tut, tut" to a hurricane.

The sleigh kicked, bucked and did a hysterical tango. It made sudden spurts, as if inspired to dash its wooden brains out against Ganymede's crust. Meanwhile Olaf prayed, swore wept and jiggled all the compressed air jets at once.

Ganymede whirled and Jupiter was a wild blur. Perhaps it was the spectacle of Jupiter doing the shimmy that steadied the spinies. More likely it was the fact that they just didn't give a hang any more. Whatever it was, they halted, made lofty farewell speeches to one another, confessed their sins and waited for death.

The sleigh steadied and Olaf resumed his breathing once more, only to stop again as he viewed the curious spectacle of hills and solid ground up above, and black sky and swollen Jupiter down below.

It was at this point that he, too, made his peace with the eternal and awaited the end.

OSSIE is short for ostrich, and that's what native Ganymedes

look like, except that their necks are shorter, their heads are larger, and their feathers look as if they were about to fall out by the roots. To this add a pair of scrawny, feathered arms with three stubby fingers apiece. They can speak English, but when you hear them, you wish they couldn't.

There were fifty of them in the low purplewood structure that was their "meeting hall." On the mound of raised dirt in the front of the room—dark with the smoky dimness of burning purplewood torches and fetid to boot—sat Commander Scott Pelham and five of his men. Before them strutted the frowziest Ossie of them all, inflating his huge chest with rhythmic, booming sounds.

He stopped for a moment and pointed to a ragged hole in the ceiling.

"Look!" he squawked. "Chimney. We make. Sannycaws come in."

Pelham grunted approval. The Ossie clucked happily. He pointed to the little sacks of woven grass that hung from the walls.

"Look! Stockies. Sannycaws put presets!"

"Yeah," said Pelham unenthusiastically. "Chimney and stockings. Very nice." He spoke out of the corner of his mouth to Sim Pierce, who sat next to him. "Another half-hour in this dump will kill me. When is that fool coming?"

Pierce stirred uneasily.

"Listen," he said, "I've been doing some figuring. We're safe on everything but the karen leaves, and we're still four tons short on that. If we can get this fool business over with in the next hour, so we can start the next shift and work the Ossies at double, we can make it." He leaned back. "Yes, I think we can make it."

"Just about," replied Pelham gloomily. "That's if Johnson gets here without pulling another bloomer."

The Ossie was talking again, for

Ossies like to talk. He said:

"Every year Kismess comes. Kismess nice, evvybody friendly. Ossis like Kismess. You like Kismess?"

"Yeah, fine." Pelham snarled politely. "Peace on Ganymede, good will toward men—especially Johnson. Where the devil is that idiot, anyhow?"

He fell into an annoyed fidget, while the Ossie jumped up and down a few times in a thoughtful sort of manner, evidently for the exercise of it. He continued the jumping, varying it with little hopping dance steps, till Pelham's fists began making strangling gestures. Only an excited squawk from the hole in the wall, dignified by the term "window," kept Pelham from committing Ossie-slaughter.

Ossies swarmed about and the Earthmen fought for a view.

Against Jupiter's great yellowness was outlined a flying sleigh, complete with reindeers. It was only a tiny thing, but there was no doubt about it. Santa Claus was coming.

There was only one thing wrong with the picture. The sleigh, "reindeer" and all, while plunging ahead at a terrific speed, was flying upside down.

The Ossies dissolved into squawking cacophony.

"Sannycaws! Sannycaws! Sannycaws!"

They scrambled out the window like so many animated dust-mops gone mad. Pelham and his men used the low door.

The sleigh was approaching, growing larger, lurching from side to side and vibrating like an off-center fly-wheel. Olaf Johnson was a tiny figure holding on desperately to the side of the sleigh with both hands.

PELHAM was shouting wildly, incoherently, choking on the thin atmosphere every time he forgot to

breathe through his nose. Then he stopped and stared in horror. The sleigh, almost life-size now, was dipping down. If it had been an arrow shot by William Tell, it could not have aimed between Pelham's eyes more accurately.

"Everybody down!" he shrieked, and dropped.

The wind of the sleigh's passage whistled keenly and brushed his face. Olaf's voice could be heard for an instant, high-pitched and indistinct. Compressed air spurted, leaving tracks of condensing water vapor.

Pelham lay quivering, hugging Ganymede's frozen crust. Then, knees shaking like a Hawaiian hula-girl, he rose slowly. The Ossies who had scattered before the plunging vehicle had assembled again. Off in the distance, the sleigh was veering back.

Pelham watched as it swayed and hovered, still rotating. It lurched toward the Dome, curved off to one side, turned back, and gathered speed.

Inside that sleigh, Olaf worked like a demon. Straddling his legs wide, he shifted his weight desperately. Sweating and cursing, trying hard not to look "downward" at Jupiter, he urged the sleigh into wilder swings. It was wobbling through an angle of 180 degrees now, and Olaf felt his stomach raise strenuous objections.

Holding his breath, he leaned hard with his right foot and felt the sleigh swing far over. At the extremity of that swing, he released the gravo-repulsor and, in Ganymede's weak gravity, the sleigh jerked downward. Naturally, since the vehicle was bottom-heavy due to the metal gravo-repulsor beneath, it righted itself as it fell.

But this was little comfort to Commander Pelham, who found himself once more in the sleigh's direct path.

"Down!" he yelled, and dropped again.

The sleigh whi-i-ished overhead, came up against a huge boulder with a crack, bounced twenty-five feet into the air, came down with a rush and a bang, and Olaf fell over the railing and out.

Santa Claus had arrived.

With a deep, shuddering breath, Olaf swung his bag over his shoulders, adjusted his beard and patted one of the silently suffering spinies on the head. Death might be coming—in fact, Olaf could hardly wait—but he was going to die on his feet nobly, like a Johnson.

Inside the shack, into which the Ossies had once more swarmed, a thump announced the arrival of Santa's bag on the roof, and a second thud the arrival of Santa himself. A ghastly face appeared through the makeshift hole in the ceiling.

"Merry Christmas!—it croaked, and tumbled through.

Olaf landed on his oxygen cylinders, as usual, and got them in the usual place.

The Ossies jumped up and down like rubber balls with the itch.

Olaf limped heavily toward the first stocking and deposited the garishly colored sphere he withdrew from his bag, one of the many that had originally been intended as a Christmas tree ornament. One by one he deposited the rest in every available stocking.

Having completed his job, he dropped into an exhausted squat, from which position he watched subsequent proceedings with a glazed and fishy eye. The jolliness and belly-shaking good humor, traditionally characteristic of Santa Claus, were absent from this one with remarkable thoroughness.

The Ossies made up for it by their wild ecstasy. Until Olaf had deposited the last globe, they had kept their silence and their seats. But when he had finished, the air heaved and writhed under the stresses of the discordant screeches that arose. In

half a second the hand of each Ossie contained a globe.

They chattered among themselves furiously, handling the globes carefully and hugging them close to their chests. Then they compared one with another, flocking about to gaze at particularly good ones.

THE frowziest Ossie approached Pelham and plucked at the commander's sleeve. "Sannycaws good," he cackled. Look, he leave eggs!" He stared reverently at his sphere and said: "Pittier'n Ossie eggs. Must be Sannycaws eggs, huh?"

His skinny finger punched Pelham in the stomach.

"No!" yowled Pelham vehemently. "Hell, no!"

But the Ossie wasn't listening. He plunged the globe deep into the warmth of his feathers and said:

"Pitty colors. How long take for little Sannycaws come out? And what little Sannycaws eat?" He looked up. "We take good care. We teach little Sannycaws, make him smart and full of hra'in like Ossie."

Pierce grabbed Commander Pelham's arm.

"Don't argue with them," he whispered frantically. "What do you care if they think those are Santa Claus eggs? Come on! If we work like maniacs, we can still make the quota. Let's get started."

"That's right," Pelham admitted. He turned to the Ossie. "Tell everyone to get going." He spoke clearly and loudly. "Work now. Do you understand? Hurry, hurry, hurry! Come on!"

He motioned with his arms. But the frowzy Ossie had come to a sudden halt. He said slowly: "We work, but Johnson say Kissmess come evvy year."

"Isn't one Christmas enough for you?" Pelham rasped.

"No!" squawked the Ossie. "We want Sannycaws next year. Get more eggs. And next year more eggs. And

next year. And next year. More eggs. More little Sannycaws eggs. If Sannycaws not come, we not work."

"That's a long time off," said Pelham. "We'll talk about it then. By that time I'll either have gone completely crazy, or you'll have forgotten all about it."

Pierce opened his mouth, closed it, opened his mouth, closed it, opened it, and then finally managed to speak.

"Commander, they want him to come every year."

"I know. They won't remember by next year, though."

"But you don't get it. A year to them is one Ganymedan revolution around Jupiter. In Earth time, that's seven days and three hours. They

want Santa Claus to come every week."

"Every week!" Pelham gulped. "Johnson told them—"

For a moment everything turned sparkling somersaults before his eyes. He choked, and automatically his eye sought Olaf.

Olaf turned cold to the marrow of his bones and rose to his feet apprehensively, sidling toward the door. There he stopped as a sudden recollection of tradition hit him. Beard a-dangle, he croaked:

"Merry Christmas to all, and to all a good night!"

He made for the sleigh as if all the imps of Hades were after him. The imps weren't, but Commander Scott Pelham was.



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*Deep in his fourth-dimensional lair crouches
the hungry monster, while only a band of
children guards the puzzled adult victims!*



I

Wrong Uncle

A LONG time afterward she went back to Los Angeles and drove past Grandmother Keaton's house. It hadn't changed a great deal, really, but what had seemed an elegant mansion to her childish, 1920 eyes

was now a big ramshackle frame structure, gray with scaling paint.

After twenty-five years the—insecurity—wasn't there any more, but there still persisted a dull, irrational, remembered uneasiness, an



echo of the time Jane Larkin had spent in that house when she was nine, a thin, big-eyed girl with the Buster Brown bangs so fashionable then.

Looking back, she could remember

too much and too little. A child's mind is curiously different from an adult's. When Jane went into the living room under the green glass chandelier, on that June day in 1920, she made a dutiful round of the fam-

ily, kissing them all. Grandmother Keaton and chilly Aunt Bessie and the four uncles. She did not hesitate when she came to the new uncle—who was different.

The other kids watched her with impassive eyes. They knew. They saw she knew. But they said nothing just then. Jane realized she could not mention the—*the trouble*—either, until they brought it up. That was part of the silent etiquette of childhood. But the whole house was full of uneasiness. The adults merely sensed a trouble, something vaguely wrong. The children, Jane saw, *knew*.

Afterward they gathered in the back yard, under the big date-palm. Jane ostentatiously fingered her new necklace and waited. She saw the looks the others exchanged—looks that said, "Do you think she really noticed?" And finally Beatrice, the oldest, suggested hide-and-seek.

"We ought to tell her, Bee," little Charles said.

Beatrice kept her eyes from Charles.

"Tell her what? You're crazy, Charles."

Charles was insistent but vague. "You know."

"Keep your old secret," Jane said. "I know what it is, anyhow. *He's* not my uncle."

"See?" Emily crowed. "She did too see it. I told you she'd notice."

"It's kind of funny," Jane said. She knew very well that the man in the living room wasn't her uncle and never had been, and he was pretending, quite hard—hard enough to convince the grown-ups—that he had always been here. With the clear, unprejudiced eye of immaturity, Jane could see that he wasn't an ordinary grown-up. He was sort of—empty.

"He just came," Emily said. "About three weeks ago."

"Three days," Charles corrected, trying to help, but his temporal

sense wasn't dependent on the calendar. He measured time by the yardstick of events, and days weren't standard sized for him. They were longer when he was sick or when it rained, and far too short when he was riding the merry-go-round at Ocean Park or playing games in the back yard.

"It was three weeks," Beatrice said.

"Where'd he come from?" Jane asked.

There were secret glances exchanged.

"I don't know," Beatrice said carefully.

"He came out of a big round hole that kept going around," Charles said. "It's like a Christmas tree through there, all fiery."

"Don't tell lies," Emily said. "Did you ever truly see that, Charles?"

"No. Only sort of."

"Don't *they* notice?" Jane meant the adults.

"No," Beatrice told her, and the children all looked toward the house and pondered the inscrutable ways of grown-ups. "They act like he's always been here. Even Granny. Aunt Bessie said he came before I did. Only I knew that wasn't right."

"Three weeks," Charles said, changing his mind.

"He's making them all feel sick," Emily said. "Aunt Bessie takes aspirins all the time."

JANE considered. On the face of it, the situation seemed a little silly. An uncle three weeks old? Perhaps the adults were merely pretending, as they sometimes did, with esoteric adult motives. But somehow that didn't seem quite the answer. Children are never deceived very long about such things.

Charles, now that the ice was broken and Jane no longer an outsider, burst suddenly into excited gabble.

"Tell her, Bee! The real secret—

you know. Can I show her the Road of Yellow Bricks? Please, Bee? Huh?"

Then the silence again. Charles was talking too much. Jane knew the Road of Yellow Bricks, of course. It ran straight through Oz from the Deadly Desert to the Emerald City.

After a long time Emily nodded.

"We got to tell her, you know," she said. "Only she might get scared. It's so dark."

"You were scared," Bobby said. "You cried, the first time."

"I didn't. Anyway it—it's only make believe."

"Oh, no!" Charles said. "I reached out and touched the crown last time."

"It isn't a crown," Emily said. "It's *him*, Ruggedo."

Jane thought of the uncle who wasn't a real uncle—who wasn't a real person. "Is he Ruggedo?" she asked.

The children understood.

"Oh, no," Charles said. "Ruggedo lives in the cellar. We give him meat. All red and bluggy. He *likes* it! Gobble, gobble!"

Beatrice looked at Jane. She nodded toward the clubhouse, which was a piano-box with a genuine secret lock. Then, somehow, quite deftly, she shifted the conversation onto another subject. A game of cowboys-and-Indians started presently and Bobby, howling terribly, led the rout around the house.

The piano-box smelled pleasantly of acacia drifting through the cracks. Beatrice and Jane, huddled together in the warm dimness, heard diminishing Indian-cries in the distance. Beatrice looked curiously adult just now.

"I'm glad you came, Janie," she said. "The little kids don't understand at all. It's pretty awful."

"Who is he?"

Beatrice shivered. "I don't know. I think he lives in the cellar." She hesitated. "You have to get to him

through the attic, though. I'd be awfully scared if the little kids weren't so—so—they don't seem to mind at all."

"But Bee. Who is he?"

Beatrice turned her head and looked at Jane, and it was quite evident then that she could not or would not say. There was a barrier. But because it was important, she tried. She mentioned the Wrong Uncle.

"I think Ruggedo's the same as him. I know he is, really. Charles and Bobby say so—and they know. They know better than I do. They're littler. . . It's hard to explain, but—well, it's sort of like the Scoodlers. Remember?"

The Scoodlers. That unpleasant race that dwelt in a cavern on the road to Oz and had the convenient ability to detach their heads and hurl them at passersby. After a moment the parallel became evident. A Schoodler could have his head in one place and his body in another. But both parts would belong to the same Scoodler.

OF COURSE the phantom uncle had a head and a body both. But Jane could understand vaguely the possibility of his double nature, one of him moving deceptively through the house, focus of a strange malaise, and the other nameless, formless, nesting in a cellar and waiting for red meat. . . .

"Charles knows more than any of us about it," Beatrice said. "He was the one who found out we'd have to feed R-Ruggedo. We tried different things, but it has to be raw meat. And if we stopped—something awful would happen. We kids found that out."

It was significant that Jane didn't ask how. Children take their equivalent of telepathy for granted.

"They don't know," Beatrice added. "We can't tell them."

"No," Jane said, and the two girls

looked at one another, caught in the terrible, helpless problem of immaturity, the knowledge that the mores of the adult world are too complicated to understand, and that children must walk warily.

Adults are always right. They are an alien race.

Luckily for the other children, they had come upon the Enemy in a body. One child alone might have had violent hysterics. But Charles, who made the first discoveries, was only six, still young enough so that the process of going insane in that particular way wasn't possible for him. A six-year-old is in a congenitally psychotic state; it is normal to him.

"And they've been sick ever since he came," Beatrice said.

Jane had already seen that. A wolf may don sheepskin and slide unobserved into a flock, but the sheep are apt to become nervous, though they can not discover the source of their discomfort.

It was a matter of mood. Even *he* showed the same mood—uneasiness, waiting, sensing that something was wrong and not knowing what—but with *him* it was simply a matter of camouflage. Jane could tell he didn't want to attract attention by varying from the arbitrary norm he had chosen—that of the human form.

JANE accepted it. The uncle who was—empty—the one in the cellar called Ruggedo, who had to be fed regularly on raw meat, so that Something wouldn't happen. . . .

A masquerader, from somewhere. He had power, and he had limitations. The obvious evidences of his power were accepted without question.

Children are realists. It was not incredible to them, for this hungry, inhuman stranger to appear among them—for here he was.

He came from somewhere. Out of time, or space, or an inconceivable

place. He never had any human feelings; the children sensed that easily. He pretended very cleverly to be human, and he could warp the adult minds to implant artificial memories of his existence. The adults thought they remembered him. An adult will recognize a mirage; a child will be deceived. But conversely, an intellectual mirage will deceive an adult, not a child.

Ruggedo's power couldn't warp their minds, for those were neither quite human nor quite sane, from the adult standpoint. Beatrice, who was oldest, was afraid. She had the beginnings of empathy and imagination.

Little Charlie felt mostly excitement. Bobbie, the smallest, had already begun to be bored. . .

Perhaps later Beatrice remembered a little of what Ruggedo looked like, but the others never did. For they reached him by a very strange road, and perhaps they were somewhat altered themselves during the time they were with him. He accepted or rejected food; that was all. Upstairs, the body of the Scoodler pretended to be human, while the Scoodler's head lay in that little, horrible nest he had made by warping space, so he was invisible and intangible to anyone who didn't know how to find the Road of Yellow Bricks.

What was he? Without standards of comparison—and there are none, in this world—he cannot be named. The children thought of him as Ruggedo. But he was not the fat, half-comic, inevitably frustrate Gnome King.

He was never that.

Call him demon.

As a name-symbol, it implies too much and not enough. But it will have to do. By the standard of maturity he was monster, alien, super-being. But because of what he did, and what he wanted—call him demon.

II

Raw, Red Meat

ONE afternoon, a few days later, Beatrice hunted up Jane. "How much money have you got, Janie?" she asked.

"Four dollars and thirty-five cents," Jane said, after investigation. "Dad gave me five dollars at the station. I bought some popcorn and—well—different things."

"Gee, I'm glad you came when you did," Beatrice blew out a long breath. Tacitly it was agreed that the prevalent socialism of childhood clubs would apply in this more urgent clubbing together of interests. Jane's small hoard was available not for any individual among them, but for the good of the group. "We were running out of money," Beatrice said. "Granny caught us taking meat out of the icebox and we don't dare any more. But we can get a lot with your money."

Neither of them thought of the inevitable time when that fund would be exhausted. Four dollars and thirty-five cents seemed fabulous, in that era. And they needn't buy expensive meat, so long as it was raw and bloody.

They walked together down the acacia-shaded street with its occasional leaning palms and drooping pepper-trees. They bought two pounds of hamburger and improvidently squandered twenty cents on sodas.

When they got back to the house, Sunday lethargy had set in. Uncles Simon and James had gone out for cigars, and Uncles Lew and Bert were reading the papers, while Aunt Bessie crocheted. Grandmother Keaton read *Young's Magazine*, diligently seeking spicy passages. The two girls paused behind the beaded por-

tieres, looking in.

"Come on, kids," Lew said in his deep, resonant voice. "Seen the funnies yet? Mutt and Jeff are good. And Spark Plug—"

"Mr. Gibson is good enough for me," Grandmother Keaton said. "He's a real artist. His people look like people."

The door banged open and Uncle James appeared, fat, grinning, obviously happy from several beers. Uncle Simon paced him like a personified conscience.

"At any rate, it's quiet," he said, turning a sour glance on Jane and Beatrice. "The children make such a rumpus sometimes I can't hear myself think."

"Granny," Beatrice asked. "Where are the kids?"

"In the kitchen, I think, dear. They wanted some water for something."

"Thanks." The two girls went out, leaving the room filled with a growing atmosphere of sub-threshold discomfort. The sheep were sensing the wolf among them, but the sheepskin disguise was sufficient. They did not know. . . .

The kids were in the kitchen, busily painting one section of the comics with brushes and water. When you did that, pictures emerged. One page of the newspaper had been chemically treated so that moisture would bring out the various colors, dull pastels, but singularly glamorous, in a class with the Japanese flowers that would bloom in water, and the Chinese paper-shelled almonds that held tiny prizes.

From behind her, Beatrice deftly produced the butcher's package.

"Two pounds," she said. "Janie had some money, and Merton's was open this afternoon. I thought we'd better. . . ."

Emily kept on painting diligently. Charles jumped up.

"Are we going up now, huh?"

Jane was uneasy. "I don't know if I'd better come along. I—"

"I don't want to either," Bobby said, but that was treason. Charles said Bobby was scared.

"I'm not. It just isn't any fun. I want to play something else."

"Emily," Beatrice said softly. "You don't have to go this time."

"Yes I do," Emily looked up at last from her painting. "I'm not scared."

"I want to see the lights," Charles said. Beatrice whirled on him.

"You tell such lies, Charles! There aren't any lights."

"There are so. Sometimes, anyhow."

"There aren't."

"There are so. You're too dumb to see them. Let's go and feed him."

IT WAS understood that Beatrice took command now. She was the oldest. She was also, Jane sensed, more afraid than the others, even Emily.

They went upstairs, Beatrice carrying the parcel of meat. She had already cut the string. In the upper hall they grouped before a door.

"This is the way, Janie," Charles said rather proudly. "We gotta go up to the attic. There's a swing-down ladder in the bathroom ceiling. We have to climb up on the tub to reach."

"My dress," Jane said doubtfully.

"You won't get dirty. Come on."

Charles wanted to be first, but he was too short. Beatrice climbed to the rim of the tub and tugged at a ring in the ceiling. The trap-door creaked and the stairs ascended slowly, with a certain majesty, beside the tub. It wasn't dark up there. Light came vaguely through the attic windows.

"Come on, Janie," Beatrice said, with a queer breathlessness, and they all scrambled up somehow, by dint of violent acrobatics.

The attic was warm, quiet and dusty. Planks were laid across the beams. Cartons and trunks were

here and there.

Beatrice was already walking along one of the beams. Jane watched her.

Beatrice didn't look back; she didn't say anything. Once her hand groped out behind her; Charles, who was nearest, took it. Then Beatrice reached a plank laid across to another rafter. She crossed it. She went on—stopped—and came back, with Charles.

"You weren't doing it right," Charles said disappointedly. "You were thinking of the wrong thing."

Beatrice's face looked oddly white in the golden, faint light.

Jane met her cousin's eyes. "Bee—"

"You have to think of something else," Beatrice said quickly. "It's all right. Come on."

Charles at her heels, she started again across the plank. Charles was saying something, in a rhythmic, mechanical monotone:

*"One, two, buckle my shoe.
Three, four, knock at the door,
Five, six, pick up sticks—"*

Beatrice disappeared.

"Seven, eight, lay them—"

Charles disappeared.

Bobby, his shoulders expressing rebelliousness, followed. And vanished.

Emily made a small sound.

"Oh—Emily!" Jane said.

But her youngest cousin only said, "I don't want to go down there, Janie!"

"You don't have to."

"Yes, I do," Emily said. "I'll tell you what. I won't be afraid if you come right after me. I always think there's something coming up behind me to grab—but if you promise to come right after, it'll be all right."

"I promise," Jane said.

Reassured, Emily walked across the bridge. Jane was watching closely this time. Yet she did not see

Emily disappear. She was suddenly—gone. Jane stepped forward, and stopped as a sound came from downstairs.

"Jane!" Aunt Bessie's voice. "Jane!" It was louder and more peremptory now. "Jane, where are you? Come here to me!"

Jane stood motionless, looking across the plank bridge. It was quite empty, and there was no trace of Emily or the other children. The attic was suddenly full of invisible menace. Yet she would have gone on, because of her promise, if—

"Jane!"

Jane reluctantly descended and followed the summons to Aunt Bessie's bedroom. That prim-mouthed woman was pinning fabric and moving her lips impatiently.

"Where on earth have you been, Jane? I've been calling and calling."

"We were playing," Jane said. "Did you want me, Aunt Bessie?"

"I should say I did," Aunt Bessie said. "This collar I've been crocheting. It's a dress for you. Come here and let me try it on. How you grow, child!"

And after that there was an eternity of pinning and wriggling, while Jane kept thinking of Emily, alone and afraid somewhere in the attic. She began to hate Aunt Bessie. Yet the thought of rebellion or escape never crossed her mind. The adults were absolute monarchs. As far as relative values went, trying on the collar was more important, at this moment, than anything else in the world. At least, to the adults who administered the world.

While Emily, alone and afraid on the bridge that led to—elsewhere. . .

THE uncles were playing poker. Aunt Gertrude, the vaudeville actress, had unexpectedly arrived for a few days and was talking with Grandmother Keaton and Aunt Bessie in the living room. Aunt Gertrude was small and pretty, very charm-

ing, with a bisque delicacy and a gusto for life that filled Jane with admiration. But she was subdued now.

"This place gives me the creeps," she said, making a dart with her folded fan at Jane's nose. "Hello, funny-face. Why aren't you playing with the other kids?"

"Oh, I'm tired," Jane said, wondering about Emily. It had been nearly an hour since—

"At your age I was never tired," Aunt Gertrude said. "Now look at me. Three a day and that awful straight man I've got—Ma, did I tell you—" The voices pitched lower.

Jane watched Aunt Bessie's skinny fingers move monotonously as she darted her crochet hook through the silk.

"This place is a morgue," Aunt Gertrude said suddenly. "What's wrong with everybody? Who's dead?"

"It's the air," Aunt Bessie said. "Too hot the year round."

"You play Rochester in winter, Bessie my girl, and you'll be glad of a warm climate. It isn't that, anyway. I feel like—mm-m—it's like being on stage after the curtain's gone up."

"It's your fancy," her mother said.

"Ghosts," Aunt Gertrude said, and was silent. Grandmother Keaton looked sharply at Jane.

"Come over here, child," she said.

Room was made on the soft, capacious lap that had held so many youngsters.

Jane snuggled against the reassuring warmth and tried to let her mind go blank, transferring all sense of responsibility to Grandmother Keaton. But it wouldn't work. There was something wrong in the house, and the heavy waves of it beat out from a center very near them.

The Wrong Uncle. Hunger and the avidity to be fed. The nearness of bloody meat tantalizing him as he lay hidden in his strange, unguess-

able nest elsewhere—otherwhere—in that strange place where the children had vanished.

He was down there, slaving for the food; he was up here, empty, avid, a vortex of hunger very nearby.

He was double, a double uncle, masked but terrifyingly clear. . . .

Jane closed her eyes and dug her head deeper into Grandmother Keaton's shoulder.

Aunt Gertrude gossiped in an oddly tense voice, as if she sensed wrongness under the surface and was frightened subtly.

"I'm opening at Santa Barbara in a couple of days, Ma," she said. "I—what's wrong with this house, anyhow? I'm as jumpy as a cat today!—and I want you all to come down and catch the first show. It's a musical comedy. I've been promoted."

"I've seen the 'Prince of Pilsen' before," Grandmother Keaton said.

"Not with me in it. It's my treat. I've engaged rooms at the hotel already. The kids have to come too. Want to see your auntie act, Jane?"

Jane nodded against her grandmother's shoulder.

"Auntie," Jane said suddenly. "Did you see all the uncles?"

"Certainly I did."

"All of them? Uncle James and Uncle Bert and Uncle Simon and Uncle Lew?"

"The whole kaboodle. Why?"

"I just wondered."

So Aunt Gertrude hadn't noticed the Wrong Uncle either. She wasn't truly observant, Jane thought.

"I haven't seen the kids, though. If they don't hurry up, they won't get any of the presents I've brought. You'd never guess what I have for you, Janie."

But Jane scarcely heard even that exciting promise. For suddenly the tension in the air gave way. The Wrong Uncle who had been a vortex of hunger a moment before was a vortex of ecstasy now. Somewhere,

somehow, at last Ruggedo was being fed. Somewhere, somehow, that other half of the double uncle was devouring his bloody fare. . . .

JANIE was not in Grandmother Keaton's lap any more. The room was a spinning darkness that winked with tiny lights—Christmas tree lights, Charles had called them—and there was a core of terror in the center of the whirl. Here in the vanished room the Wrong Uncle was a funnel leading from that unimaginable nest where the other half of him dwelt, and through the funnel, into the room, poured the full ecstatic tide of his satiety.

Somehow in this instant Jane was very near the other children who must stand beside that spinning focus of darkness. She could almost sense their presence, almost put out her hand to touch theirs.

Now the darkness shivered and the bright, tiny lights drew together, and into her mind came a gush of impossible memories. She was too near him. And he was careless as he fed. He was not guarding his thoughts. They poured out, formless as an animal's, filling the dark. Thoughts of red food, and of other times and places where that same red food had been brought him by other hands.

It was incredible. The memories were not of earth, not of this time or place. He had traveled far, Ruggedo. In many guises. He remembered now, in a flow of shapeless fissions, he remembered tearing through furred sides that squirmed away from his hunger, remembered the gush of hot sweet redness through the fur.

Not the fur of anything Jane had ever imagined before. . . .

He remembered a great court paved with shining things, and something in bright chains in the center, and rings of watching eyes as he entered and neared the sacrifice.

As he tore his due from its smooth sides, the cruel chains clanked around him as he fed. . . .

Jane tried to close her eyes and not watch. But it was not with eyes that she watched. And she was ashamed and a little sickened because she was sharing in that feast, tasting the warm red sweetness with Ruggedo in memory, feeling the spin of ecstasy through her head as it spun through his.

"Ah—the kids are coming now," Aunt Gertrude was saying from a long way off.

Jane heard her dimly, and then more clearly, and then suddenly Grandmother Keaton's lap was soft beneath her again, and she was back in the familiar room. "A herd of elephants on the stairs, eh?" Aunt Gertrude said.

They were returning. Jane could hear them too now. Really, they were making much less noise than usual. They were subdued until about half-way down the stairs, and then there was a sudden outburst of clattering and chatter that rang false to Jane's ears.

The children came in, Beatrice a little white, Emily pink and puffy around the eyes. Charles was bubbling over with repressed excitement, but Bobby, the smallest, was glum and bored. At sight of Aunt Gertrude, the uproar redoubled, though Beatrice exchanged a quick, significant glance with Jane.

Then presents and noise, and the uncles coming back in; excited discussion of the trip to Santa Barbara—a strained cheeriness that, somehow, kept dying down into heavy silence.

None of the adults ever really looked over their shoulders, but—the feeling was of bad things to come.

Only the children—not even Aunt Gertrude—were aware of the complete emptiness of the Wrong Uncle. The projection of a lazy, torpid, semi-mindless entity. Superficially he was

as convincingly human as if he had never focused his hunger here under this roof, never let his thoughts whirl through the minds of the children, never remembered his red, dripping feasts of other times and places.

He was very sated now. They could feel the torpor pulsing out in slow, drowsy waves so that all the grown-ups were yawning and wondering why. But even now he was empty. Not real. The "Nobody-there" feeling was as acute as ever to all the small, keen, perceptive minds that saw him as he was.

III

Sated Eater

LATER, at bedtime, only Charles wanted to talk about the matter. It seemed to Jane that Beatrice had grown up a little since the early afternoon. Bobby was reading "The Jungle Book," or pretending to, with much pleased admiration of the pictures showing Shere Khan, the tiger. Emily had turned her face to the wall and was pretending to be asleep.

"Aunt Bessie called me," Jane told her, sensing a faint reproach. "I tried as soon as I could to get away from her. She wanted to try that collar thing on me."

"Oh." The apology was accepted. But Beatrice still refused to talk. Jane went over to Emily's bed and put her arm around the little girl.

"Mad at me, Emily?"

"No."

"You are, though. I couldn't help it, honey."

"It was all right," Emily said. "I didn't care."

"All bright and shiny," Charles said sleepily. "Like a Christmas tree."

Beatrice whirled on him. "Shut

up!" she cried. "Shut up Charles! Shut up, shut up, *shut up!*"

Aunt Bessie put her head into the room.

"What's the matter, children?" she asked.

"Nothing, Auntie," Beatrice said. "We were just playing."

Fed, temporarily satiated, it lay torpid in its curious nest. The house was silent, the occupants asleep. Even the Wrong Uncle slept, for Ruggedo was a good mimic.

The Wrong Uncle was not a phantasm, not a mere projection of Ruggedo. As an amoeba extends a pseudopod toward food, so Ruggedo had extended and created the Wrong Uncle. But there the parallel stopped. For the Wrong Uncle was not an elastic extension that could be withdrawn at will. Rather, he—it—was a permanent limb, as a man's arm is. From the brain through the neural system the message goes, and the arm stretches out, the fingers contract—and there is food in the hand's grip.

But Ruggedo's extension was less limited. It was not permanently bound by rigid natural laws of matter. An arm may be painted black. And the Wrong Uncle looked and acted human, except to clear immature eyes.

There were rules to be followed, even by Ruggedo. The natural laws of a world could bind it to a certain extent. There were cycles. The life-span of a moth-caterpillar is run by cycles, and before it can spin its cocoon and metamorphose, it must eat—eat—eat. Not until the time of change has come can it evade its current incarnation. Nor could Ruggedo change, now, until the end of its cycle had come. Then there would be another metamorphosis, as there had already, in the unthinkable eternity of its past, been a million curious mutations.

But, at present, it was bound by the rules of its current cycle. The ex-

tension could not be withdrawn. And the Wrong Uncle was a part of it, and it was a part of the Wrong Uncle.

The Scoodler's body and the Scoodler's head.

Through the dark house beat the unceasing, drowsy waves of satiety—slowly, imperceptibly quickening toward that nervous pulse of avidity that always came after the processes of indigestion and digestion had been completed.

Aunt Bessie rolled over and began to snore. In another room, the Wrong Uncle, without waking, turned on his back and also snored.

The talent of protective mimicry was well developed. . . .

IT WAS afternoon again, though by only half an hour, and the pulse in the house had changed subtly in tempo and mood.

"If we're going up to Santa Barbara," Grandmother Keaton had said. "I'm going to take the children down to the dentist today. Their teeth want cleaning, and it's hard enough to get an appointment with Dr. Hover for one youngster, not to mention four. Jane, your mother wrote me you'd been to the dentist a month ago, so you needn't go."

After that the trouble hung unspoken over the children. But no one mentioned it. Only, as Grandmother Keaton herded the kids out on the porch, Beatrice waited till last. Jane was in the doorway, watching Beatrice reached behind her without looking, fumbled, found Jane's hand, and squeezed it hard. That was all.

But the responsibility had been passed on. No words had been needed. Beatrice had said plainly that it was Jane's job now. It was her responsibility.

She dared not delay too long. She was too vividly aware of the rising tide of depression affecting the adults. Ruggedo was getting hungry again.

She watched her cousins till they

vanished beneath the pepper-trees, and the distant rumble of the trolley put a period to any hope of their return. After that, Jane walked to the butcher shop and bought two pounds of meat. She drank a soda. Then she came back to the bouse.

She felt the pulse beating out faster.

She got a tin pan from the kitchen and put the meat on it, and slipped up to the bathroom. It was hard to reach the attic with her burden and without help, but she did it. In the warm stillness beneath the roof she stood waiting, half-hoping to hear Aunt Bessie call again and relieve her of this duty. But no voice came.

The simple mechanics of what she had to do were sufficiently prosaic to keep fear at a little distance. Besides, she was scarcely nine. And it was not dark in the attic.

She walked along the rafter, balancing, till she came to the plank bridge. She felt its resilient vibration underfoot.

"One, two, buckle my shoe,
Three, four, knock at the door,
Five, six, pick up sticks,
Seven, eight—"

She missed the way twice. The third time she succeeded. The mind had to be at just the right pitch of abstraction. . . She crossed the bridge, and turned, and—

IT WAS dim, almost dark, in this place. It smelled cold and hollow, of the underground. Without surprise she knew she was deep down, perhaps beneath the house, perhaps very far away from it. That was as acceptable to her as the rest of the strangeness. She felt no surprise.

Curiously, she seemed to know the way. She was going into a tiny enclosure, and yet at the same time she wandered for awhile through low-roofed, hollow spaces, endless, very dim, smelling of cold and moisture. An unpleasant place to the mind,

and a dangerous place as well to wander through with one's little pan of meat.

It found the meat acceptable.

Looking back later, Jane had no recollection whatever of it. She did not know how she had proffered the food, or how it had been received, or where in that place of paradoxical space and smallness it lay dreaming of other worlds and eras.

She only knew that the darkness spun around her again, winking with little lights, as it devoured its food. Memories swirled from its mind to hers as if the two minds were of one fabric. She saw more clearly this time. She saw a great winged thing caged in a glittering pen, and she remembered as Ruggedo remembered, and leaped with Ruggedo's leap, feeling the wings buffet about her and feeling her rending hunger rip into the body, and tasting avidly the hot, sweet, salty fluid bubbling out.

It was a mixed memory. Blending with it, other victims shifted beneath Ruggedo's grip, the feathery pinions becoming the best of great clawed arms and the writhe of reptilian litherness. All his victims became one in memory as he ate.

One flash of another memory opened briefly toward the last. Jane was aware of a great swaying garden of flowers larger than herself, and of cowed figures moving silently among them, and of a victim with showering pale hair lying helpless upon the lip of one gigantic flower, held down with chains like shining blossoms. And it seemed to Jane that she herself went cowed among those silent figures, and that be—it—Ruggedo—in another guise walked beside her toward the sacrifice.

It was the first human sacrifice he had recalled. Jane would have liked to know more about that. She had no moral scruples, of course. Food was food. But the memory flickered smoothly into another picture and she never saw the end. She did not

really need to see it. There was only one end to all these memories. Perhaps it was as well for her that Ruggedo did not dwell overlong on that particular moment of all his bloody meals.

"Seventee, eighteen,
Maids in waiting,
Nineteen, twenty—"

She tilted precariously back across the rafters, holding her empty pan. The attic smelled dusty. It helped to take away the reek of remembered crimson from her mind. . . .

When the children came back, Beatrice said simply, "Did you?" and Jane nodded. The taboo still held. They would not discuss the matter more fully except in case of real need. And the drowsy, torpid heat in the house, the psychic emptiness of the Wrong Uncle, showed plainly that the danger had been averted again—for a time. . . .

"Read me about Mowgli, Granny," Bobby said. Grandmother Keaton settled down, wiped and adjusted her spectacles, and took up Kipling. Presently the other children were drawn into the charmed circle. Grandmother spoke of Shere Khan's downfall—of the cattle driven into the deep gulch to draw the tiger—and of the earth-shaking stampede that smashed the killer into bloody pulp.

"Well," Grandmother Keaton said, closing the book, "that's the end of Shere Khan. He's dead now."

"No he isn't," Bobby roused and said sleepily.

"Of course he is. Good and dead. The cattle killed him."

"Only at the end, Granny. If you start reading at the beginning again, Shere Khan's right there."

Bobby, of course, was too young to have any conception of death. You were killed sometimes in games of cowboys-and-Indians, an ending neither regrettable nor fatal. Death is an absolute term that needs personal experience to be made understandable.

Uncle Lew smoked his pipe and wrinkled the brown skin around his eyes at Uncle Bert, who bit his lips and hesitated a long time between moves. But Uncle Lew won the chess game anyway. Uncle James winked at Aunt Gertrude and said he thought he'd take a walk, would she like to come along? She would.

After their departure, Aunt Bessie looked up, sniffed.

"You just take a whiff of their breaths when they come back, Ma," she said. "Why do you stand for it?"

But Grandmother Keaton chuckled and stroked Bobby's hair. He had fallen asleep on her lap his hands curled into small fists, his cheeks faintly flushed.

Uncle Simon's gaunt figure stood by the window.

He watched through the curtains, and said nothing at all.

"Early to bed," Aunt Bessie said, "if we're going to Santa Barbara in the morning, children!"

And that was that.

IV

End of the Game

BY MORNING Bobby was running a temperature, and Grandmother Keaton refused to risk his life in Santa Barbara. This made Bobby very sullen, but solved the problem the children had been wondering about for many hours. Also, a telephone call from Jane's father said that he was arriving that day to pick up his daughter, and she had a little brother now. Jane, who had no illusions about the stork, was relieved, and hoped her mother wouldn't be sick any more now.

A conclave was held in Bobby's bedroom before breakfast.

"You know what to do, Bobby," Beatrice said. "Promise you'll do it?"

"Promise. Uh-huh."

"You can do it today, Janie, before your father comes. And you'd better get a lot of meat and leave it for Bobby."

"I can't buy any meat without money," Bobby said. Somewhat reluctantly Beatrice counted out what was left of Jane's small hoard, and handed it over. Bobby stuffed the change under his pillow and pulled at the red flannel wound around his neck.

"It scratches," he said. "I'm not sick, anyway."

"It was those green pears you ate yesterday," Emily said very meanly. "You thought nobody saw you, didn't you?"

Charles came in; he had been downstairs. He was breathless.

"Hey, know what happened?" he said. "He hurt his foot. Now he can't go to Santa Barbara. I bet he did it on purpose."

"Gosh," Jane said. "How?"

"He said he twisted it on the stairs. But I bet it's a lie. He just doesn't want to go."

"Maybe he can't go—that far." Beatrice said, with a sudden flash of intuition, and they spoke no more of the subject. But Beatrice, Emily and Charles were all relieved that the Wrong Uncle was not to go to Santa Barbara with them, after all.

It took two taxis to carry the travelers and their luggage. Grandmother Keaton, the Wrong Uncle, and Jane stood on the front porch and waved. The automobiles clattered off, and Jane promptly got some money from Bobby and went to the butcher store, returning heavy-laden.

The Wrong Uncle, leaning on a cane, hobbled into the sun-parlor and lay down. Grandmother Keaton made a repulsive but healthful drink for Bobby, and Jane decided not to do what she had to do until afternoon. Bobby read "The Jungle Book," stumbling over the hard words, and, for the while, the truce held.

Jane was not to forget that day quickly. The smells were sharply distinct; the odor of baking bread from the kitchen, the sticky-sweet flower scents from outside, the slightly dusty, rich-brown aroma exhaled by the sun-warmed rugs and furniture. Grandmother Keaton went up to her bedroom to coldcream her hands and face, and Jane lounged on the threshold, watching.

It was a charming room, in its comfortable, unimaginative way. The curtains were so stiffly starched that they billowed out in crisp whiteness, and the bureau was cluttered with fascinating objects—a pin-cushion shaped like a doll, a tiny red china shoe, with tinier gray china mice on it, a cameo brooch bearing a portrait of Grandmother Keaton as a girl.

And slowly, insistently, the pulse increased, felt even here, in this bedroom, where Jane felt it was a rather impossible intrusion.

Directly after lunch the bell rang, and it was Jane's father, come to take her back to San Francisco. He was in a hurry to catch the train, and there was time only for a hurried conversation before the two were whisked off in the waiting taxi. But Jane had found time to run upstairs and say good-by to Bobby—and tell him where the meat was hidden.

"All right, Janie," Bobby said. "Good-by."

She knew she should not have left the job to Bobby. A nagging sense of responsibility haunted her all the way to the railroad station. She was only vaguely aware of adult voices saying the train would be very late, and of her father suggesting that the circus was in town. . . .

IT WAS a good circus. She almost forgot Bobby and the crisis that would be mounting so dangerously unless he met it as he had promised. Early evening was blue as they moved with the crowd out of the

tent. And then through a rift Jane saw a small, familiar figure, and the bottom dropped out of her stomach. She *knew*.

Mr. Larkin saw Bobby in almost the same instant. He called sharply, and a moment later the two children were looking at one another, Bobby's plump face sullen.

"Does your grandmother know you're here, Bobby?" Mr. Larkin said.

"Well, I guess not," Bobby said.

"You ought to be paddled, young man. Come along, both of you. I'll have to phone her right away. She'll be worried to death."

In the drug store, while he telephoned, Jane looked at her cousin. She was suffering the first pangs of maturity's burden, the knowledge of responsibility misused.

"Bobby," she said. "Did you?"

"You leave me alone," Bobby said with a scowl. There was silence.

Mr. Larkin came back. "Nobody answered. I've called a taxi. There'll be just time to get Bobby back before our train leaves."

In the taxi also there was mostly silence. As for what might be happening at the house, Jane did not think of that at all. The mind has its own automatic protections. And in any case, it was too late now. . . .

When the taxi drew up the house was blazing with orange squares of windows in the dusk. There were men on the porch, and light glinted on a police officer's shield.

"You kids wait here," Mr. Larkin said uneasily. "Don't get out of the car."

The taxi driver shrugged and pulled out a folded newspaper as Mr. Larkin hurried toward the porch. In the back seat Jane spoke to Bobby, her voice very soft.

"You didn't," she whispered. It was not even an accusation.

"I don't care," Bobby whispered back. "I was tired of that game. I wanted to play something else." He

giggled. "I won, anyhow," he declared.

"How? What happened?"

"The police came, like I knew they would. *He* never thought of that. So I won."

"But how?"

"Well, it was sort of like 'The Jungle Book.' Shooting tigers, remember? They tied a kid to a stake and, when the tiger comes—bang! Only the kids were all gone to Santa Barbara, and you'd gone too. So I used Granny. I didn't think she'd mind. She plays games with us a lot. And anyhow, she was the only one left."

"But Bobby, a kid doesn't mean a kid like us. It means a baby goat. And anyhow—"

"Oh!" Bobby whispered. "Oh—well, anyhow, I thought Granny would be all right. She's too fat to run fast." He grinned scornfully. "*He's* dumb," he said. "He should have known the hunters always come when you tie a kid out for the tiger. He doesn't know anything. When I told him I'd locked Granny in her room and nobody else was around, I thought he might guess." Bobby looked crafty. "I was smart. I told him through the window. I thought he might think about me being a kid. But he didn't. He went right upstairs—fast. He even forgot to limp. I guess he was pretty hungry by then." Bobby glanced toward the swarming porch. "Prob'ly the police have got him now," he added carelessly. "It was easy as pie. I won."

Jane's mind had not followed these fancies.

"Is she dead?" she asked, very softly.

Bobby looked at her. The word had a different meaning for him. It had no meaning, beyond a phase in a game. And, to his knowledge, the tiger had never harmed the tethered kid.

Mr. Larkin was coming back to the taxi now, walking very slowly and not very straight.

Jane could not see his face. . . .

IT WAS hushed up, of course, as much as possible. The children, who knew so much more than those who were shielding them, were futilely protected from the knowledge of what had happened. As futilely as they in their turn, had tried to protect their elders. Except for the two oldest girls, they didn't particularly care. The game was over. Granny had had to go away on a long, long journey, and she would never be back.

They understood what *that* meant well enough. .

The Wrong Uncle, on the other hand, had had to go away too, they were told, to a big hospital where he would be taken care of all his life.

This puzzled them all a little, for it fell somewhat outside the limits of their experience. Death they understood very imperfectly, but this other thing was completely mystifying. They didn't greatly care, once their interest faded, though Bobby for some time listened to readings of "The Jungle Book" with unusual attention, wondering if this time they would take the tiger away instead of killing him on the spot. They never did, of course. Evidently in real life tigers were different. . . .

For a long time afterward, in nightmares, Jane's perverse imagination dwelt upon and relived the things she would not let it remember when she was awake. She would see Granny's bedroom as she had seen it last, the starched curtains billowing, the sunshine, the red china shoe, the doll pin-cushion. Granny, rubbing cold cream into her wrinkled hands and looking up more and more nervously from time to time as the long, avid waves of hunger pulsed through the house from the thing in its dreadful hollow place down below.

It must have been very hungry. The Wrong Uncle, pretending to a wrenched ankle downstairs, must

have shifted and turned upon the couch, that hollow man, empty and blind of everything but the need for sustenance. the one red food he could not live without. The empty automaton in the sunporch and the ravenous being in its warp below pulsing with one hunger, ravening for one food. . . .

It had been very wise of Bobby to speak through the window when he delivered his baited message.

Upstairs in the locked room, Granny must have discovered presently that she could not get out. Her fat, mottled fingers, slippery from cold-creaming, must have tugged vainly at the knob.

Jane dreamed of the sound of those footsteps many times. The tread she had never heard was louder and more real to her than any which had ever sounded in her ears. She knew very surely how they must have come bounding up the stairs, thump, thump, thump, two steps at a time, so that Granny would look up in alarm, knowing it could not be the uncle with his wrenched ankle. She would have jumped up then, her heart knocking, thinking wildly of burglars.

It can't have lasted long. The steps would have taken scarcely the length of a heartbeat to come down the hall. And by now the house would be shaking and pulsing with one triumphant roar of hunger almost appeased. The thumping steps would beat in rhythm to it, the long quick strides coming with dreadful purposefulness down the hall. And then the key clicking in the lock. And then—

Usually then Jane awoke. . . .

A LITTLE boy isn't responsible. Jane told herself that many times, then and later. She didn't see Bobby again very often, and when she did he had forgotten a great deal; new experiences had crowded out the old. He got a puppy for

Christmas, and he started to school. When he heard that the Wrong Uncle had died in the asylum he had had to think hard to remember who they meant, for to the younger children the Wrong Uncle had never been a member of the family, only a part in a game they had played and won.

Gradually the nameless distress which had once pervaded the household faded and ceased. It was strongest, most desperate, in the days just after Granny's death, but everyone attributed that to shock. When it died away they were sure.

By sheer accident Bobby's cold, limited logic had been correct. Ruggedo would not have been playing fair if he had brought still another Wrong Uncle into the game, and Bobby had trusted him to observe the rules. He did observe them, for they were a law he could not break.

Ruggedo and the Wrong Uncle were parts of a whole, indissolubly bound into their cycle. Not until the cycle had been successfully completed could the Wrong Uncle exten-

sion be retracted or the cord broken. So, in the end, Ruggedo was helpless.

In the asylum, the Wrong Uncle slowly starved. He would not touch what they offered. He knew what he wanted, but they would not give him that. The head and the body died together, and the house that had been Grandmother Keaton's was peaceful once more.

If Bobby ever remembered, no one knew it. He had acted with perfect logic, limited only by his experience. If you do something sufficiently bad, the policeman will come and get you. And he was tired of the game. Only his competitive instinct kept him from simply quitting it and playing something else.

As it was, he wanted to win—and he had won.

No adult would have done what Bobby did—but a child is of a different species. By adult standards, a child is not wholly sane. Because of the way his mind worked, then—because of what he did, and what he wanted—

Call him demon.



Read **THE VIRGIN OF ZESH**, L. Sprague de Camp's rollicking new novel—and Kendell Foster Crossen's brilliant new novelet, **ASSIGNMENT TO ALDEBARAN**—both in the story-packed February issue of—

THRILLING WONDER STORIES

SCIENCE FICTION BY TOP WRITERS—25c A COPY!

They found the future — but lost the men who made it



FIND the Sculptor

By **SAMUEL MINES**

I WAS on the fag-end of a twelve-hour day when I welded the last bus bar in place.

I lifted the rod to break the arc, and when the flame winked out I was blind until I shoved the welder's mask back.

"There it is," I said, groaning a

little and fumbling for a cigarette. "The first blasted time machine. Put together by the ingenuity of man and a lot of old kitchen stoves, auto bodies and superannuated frying

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pans. And I hope to Jupiter it doesn't work."

Professor Conrad took his fingers off an electric cable and pushed back the horn-rimmed specs which were forever sliding down the steep arch of his nose.

"Why?" he asked mildly.

"Because you'll break your neck on it," I said dourly, pulling off the thick leather glove with which I had been trying to get a butt out of the pack.

"They said that to the Wright brothers," Marc Conrad replied.

"Sure, and they did—or a lot of other lads did. Anyway, I don't see why it should work."

"You've been working with me for two years, Hank Gamble," Conrad said. "If you don't see it yet I can't hope to explain it to you now at the last minute."

"Oh, I don't mean the gadget itself. Heck, I built every circuit into the blamed squirrel cage—designed some myself. Electrically it's impressive enough."

I glowered at the thing which looked like an oversized telephone booth crammed with dials and controls, with lots of open space where only bars or plexiglas held it together.

"It's the whole blasted theory of time travel," I said. "I don't believe there is such a thing as time, actually. It's just an invention of man's so he'll know when to meet a train. As a matter of fact, I'm opposed to time and to clocks. They annoy me."

Professor Conrad shook his head.

"Time is not an artificial concept, Hank. It's a dimension, as Einstein said, but it's more than that. For example, you admit this planet, Earth, is moving, do you not?"

"Yeah."

"Suppose I ask you to locate it for me. You can go to work with a map of the Solar System and try to find it. What do you find? You find you have an orbit, not a point. You can

give me its exact location for today, but tomorrow your answer is wrong. Yesterday your answer was wrong. The planet has moved. Therefore three dimensions are not enough to locate the Earth. You must add the additional dimension of time. Earth is at such and such a position—when? Do you see?"

"Sure," I said, grinning with the thought that I had him now. "And if you go back in time to the spot where Earth was yesterday do you find it? No! It's in tomorrow! So your whole idea of traveling back in time is screwy. The Earth keeps moving ahead. You go back, Marc, and it won't be there."

He smiled.

"That's very clever, Hank. But I told you that time was more than a dimension. It's a whole set of circumstances, not an isolated phenomenon. I believe that if I go back in time I move along a fixed spiral of events and I will always find the Earth where it should be. However, that is relatively easy to understand. What I intend to do is much more difficult, Hank. I propose to go into the future."

"Oh, fine. In other words you're going to a spot the earth hasn't even reached yet and you expect to find it there. How can it be, Marc? How can it be there and here and everywhere else simultaneously?"

"If I knew that I wouldn't have to go," he said, pushing back the specs. "I've got a hunch, maybe no more than that. And you'd be surprised how many of the scientific miracles have come out of nothing more than a hunch. You'll have to take me on faith, Hank—the same kind of faith that made people give credence to Biblical miracles."

"When you going?"

"Tomorrow. We'll need some sleep. And I want to invite some of my distinguished and skeptical colleagues so I can watch their eyes bug out as I disappear from sight. You'll have

to be rested because you'll be controlling this end."

THE time machine had an elaborate set of controls inside. It could be adjusted, according to Professor Conrad, to reach any point in the past or future without marginal error of more than eight hours. It had an automatic return device which could be set for any length of stay. And on this end, I could bring it back with a magnetic coupler if I thought an emergency warranted it.

I slept pretty well that night. I always do, even if I'm worried. But in the morning I tried once more.

"Look, Marc," I said. "Maybe you'd better let me go."

"Why?" he asked, surprised.

"Well, kid, you're a great brain and all that, but you're not much when it comes to the rough-and-tumble. And nobody knows what kind of bug-eyed monsters you're liable to run into where you're going."

He opened his eyes a little and the specs slid down his nose and he made a grab for them.

"Why, Hank," he said, punching me. "I didn't know you cared."

"Skip it," I muttered.

The savants and graybeards began to arrive, and Marc was in his glory, showing them through the lab and explaining the brand-new time machine and how it was supposed to work. The old boys were very eloquent. "Humph!" was about the gist of their conversation, though some asked questions in mathematical formulas that rolled off me like the well-known rain off the equally notorious duck.

The lecture was finished finally and Marc showed the bunch to seats which he had arranged in a semi-circle around the machine. There were the presidents of three big universities, the Mayor of New York, two research geniuses—or is it geni?—from Westinghouse and General Electric, and a little dried-

up hunchback of a man who worked in the basement of his Brooklyn home and was said to be closer to creating a pocket-sized cyclotron than any man alive.

They sat there watching, and I could tell that not a mum of them believed the thing would work. They put them in my camp because I didn't either, yet I wanted to toss them all out.

But Marc never turned a hair. He stepped up into the machine and began to set his dials.

"I am going five hundred years into the future," he explained. "The progress of mankind should be so stupendous in that time that we should find it an amazing period. Anything further into the future might be beyond our capacities to understand. Now, gentlemen, no matter how long I stay in this world of the future, even though it be weeks, months or years, I will set the machine for return to this same day, so that to you I will seem to have been gone only perhaps a few moments. Please watch closely."

CONSIDERING the fact that he had never done this before, and so far as anybody knew he might just be committing hara-kiri, it was amazing, the surety he displayed.

"I have a transcribing machine," he told them, "into which I will speak to record my impressions as I go. Unless something happens, it should give us a complete record of my experiences. All right, Hank, I'm ready."

I felt like the man at Sing Sing when he pulls the switch, but I wasn't going to show Marc Conrad that he was tougher than I. I walked over to the big generator and yanked down the knife switch.

The current built up and the generator whined up into the higher octaves. I could almost feel that colossal magnetic field building up around the squirrel cage. Conrad's

face seemed to waver as though seen through water. I wondered: if the blamed thing warped space wouldn't it warp this building right out into the street? The assemblage was leaning forward, staring.

Then the machine began to fade. The field closed in and the flickering got bad. Conrad's face blurred and everything ran together. Then it was gone. There was only the little dais where it had stood.

A deep breath went out of those scientists and every man turned to stare at his neighbor. My heart was lurching around like a drunk, and I picked out a chair and sat down.

"Amazing," said a professor. "Where do you suppose he's gone?"

"Most astonishing illusion," said another. He hopped up and passed his arm through the space where the machine had been. "No, it's not optical. He's gone."

"Better sit down, Doc," I suggested, "before he comes back and runs you over."

The professor went back to his seat. He'd barely got there when the flickering began again. The machine swam out of the mists and began to take shape.

"He's back," someone whispered.

"Where is he?"

I couldn't see Marc. The flickering was beginning to clear and the machine to stand out sharply. I leaned forward and thought I saw something. The flickering steadied and I pulled the switch so that the magnetic field collapsed. I ran forward and pulled down the protecting bar on the front.

A little trickle of blood edged toward me. Conrad was in there, slumped in a heap like a bundle of old rags. There was blood all over him.

"Good heavens!" said someone behind me. . . .

I got my hands on him, as gently as I could, and started to lift him out.

"Hank?" His eyes opened. "Don't move me—I'm done. Bricks—fell on me. All—crushed—inside. Made it, Hank. Five-five hundred years. Saw the future. All—on record—play it. So long . . . kid."

He was dead. Just like that. Thirty seconds ago he had been right here, without a scratch on him, and he had gone five hundred years into the future and come back crushed to death. It was too much for me to get all at once. I didn't feel anything.

I lifted him out, carried him to the couch. The scientists clustered around, clucking. The Mayor bustled to the phone and called the police.

"This is murder," he said firmly.

"Who you going to arrest?" I asked.

"Maybe you," he said darkly.

"This is very funny."

The others milled around helplessly. I wiped Marc's face and pushed the glasses back on the bridge of his nose. I felt like a kid lost in a big department store. I went back to the machine. There was blood on the floor and I wiped it up. Then I saw the other thing on the floor.

It was a bronze head. I pulled it out and held it in the light. It was Marc.

Whoever had done it was good. It was almost alive. You expected him to push the glasses back on his nose and start to talk.

"Now where did that come from?" the Mayor demanded.

He had the mentality of a cop. Anything unexplained annoyed him.

"He apparently brought it back with him," one of the graybeards said, pulling his beard. They were beginning to be plenty scared now. "Who could have done it? And so quickly?"

"You forget," I reminded him, "that he could have stayed there for years and still come back here within seconds after he left."

I reached in and turned on the transcriber.

"This is Marc Conrad," it said.

IT GAVE me the creeps to hear his voice again, alive, when he lay there on the couch, just slipped out of life. The gang stopped milling around and crowded in close.

"The room is fading out," the record said. "I see it as though through water, with the faces of all of you rippling and running together and slowly growing dark. Now it is all black. I could be stone-blind. Wait, there are flashes of light running like quicksilver through the dark, streaks and comets of color. There is a sense of motion and of twisting that does unpleasant things to my stomach. I hope I shan't be sick. Does this feeling of motion mean I am moving in space as well as in pure time? It must be, for as I told Hank yesterday, there must be movement through the three physical dimensions as well as time if I am to meet this planet elsewhere in the time stream. It is at a different point for each point in time.

"Something just went by. Something enormous. I can't even venture a guess as to what it is, though it was glowing a dull red. It might have been quite bright, perhaps a star, but it may be that I am moving close to the speed of light.

"The sickness is growing worse, and I feel very dizzy. I wouldn't want to. . . ."

The voice failed and there was only the scratch of the stylus. He'd passed out all right. Nobody moved. They were frozen, staring at the machine. It scratched along for some time. Then the voice came in.

"Better now. Must have fainted. We seem to be slowing down. Yes, the light is growing stronger. Here's the flickering. I see buildings . . . Holy smoke, what buildings!

"This is the future, it can be nothing else! The buildings are incredible, staggering monoliths, soaring up like mountains. Each is a needle

piercing the sky, surrounded by acres of green park. No jamming, no congestion. There are people strolling on the walks, superb-looking, healthy people. The men wear only shorts, the women little more. Yes, they see the machine. They're running toward it. I'm going to open the bar."

There was an empty scratching again. Then Conrad's voice came back, sounding different. It was laughing happy.

"I'm a hero! These people know all about me. It is in their history books that I made the first time trip in Nineteen-fifty-five. So I'm a pioneer. The legend of the first time trip is well preserved. There's even a bronze head of me here, standing on a stone base in a little park. It's old—it's been here for a long, long time. Apparently my own age will recognize the importance of this discovery.

"The year here is Twenty-four hundred and fifty-five, just five hundred years past our time. I couldn't begin to touch on the scientific marvels I have discovered. But I shall take notes and make as many sketches as I can, to bring home. I shall be very busy for the next few months, but I'll try to get to the machine at least once a day to report progress."

Scratch, scratch again. Then a shorter report. He was a hero all right, a legendary figure out of the past. The people were light-hearted children, freed of the curse of work, with nothing to do but throw parties. Marc got around. It was as though George Washington should suddenly return to New York of Nineteen-fifty-five. Wouldn't we throw him a party though! And take him around and show him all the statues of him! And all the streets and squares and cities and things named after him! Well, it was that way with Marc Conrad.

Then, about the ninth day came something different.

"There's a snake in this garden of Eden," Marc reported. "The people are afraid of invasion. Somebody's been raiding cities. Whether they are pirates from another part of Earth just after women and loot, or are actually from another planet nobody knows. They come in so fast that nobody can tell what their ships are like. They may be rocket stratosphere fliers, or may actually be space ships from outside Earth. But they've done a lot of looting and burning and killing."

"These New Yorkers of Twenty-four-fifty-five are not fighters. They're psychologically trained out of the killing habit. And these attacks leave them bewildered and frightened."

Scratch, scratch. Then Marc's voice came over, hoarse and loud and panting.

"Raid!" he gasped. "They're bombing the city now—or leveling it with some kind of destructive ray. Can't see the ships—too high—too fast. All these tremendous buildings—crumpling! Tons and tons of stone, brick, metal—pouring down, burying everything! The whole city is being destroyed! I'm getting out of here. I'll bring back that bronze head as proof. . . ."

HE WAS gone, leaving the machine open. We heard sounds then, sounds such as we had never heard before. There was a horrible screeching whine as of something cleaving the air with unimaginable speed. Then a mighty sustained roar like Niagara amplified a thousand times. Far away there were crashes and deep, heavy vibrations almost below the level of hearing.

This went on for tense minutes. Then a metallic clang close by. And Marc's voice, hardly recognizable, weak, distorted, in agony.

"Got it," he whispered. "I'm hurt—wall collapsed. I'm—coming back—"

That was all. I shut it off. The men were staring at me, at the machine, at each other. They felt, I knew, as if madness were stalking them in that quiet room. Could they believe what they had just heard?

I don't know what they believed. I didn't care. I felt just then that I had to do something or I would go crazy myself. Emotion was boiling up in me, and boiling up until I had to get rid of it or burst. So I did something which I suppose was typically-crazy. I went back to my room and got my service revolver. Then I came back and stepped into the machine.

Sure it was crazy. What good was a revolver against atomic bombs or rays which could bring down buildings bigger than the Empire State? But the madness had got me and I had to do something.

"Hey!" the Mayor beefed. "What are you doing?"

He was too late. I shut down the bar, turned the dials up five hundred years and closed my switch. I'd been thoughtful enough to start the generator as I went past it. I had to trust the boys not to monkey with it while I was gone.

The room swam out and things got black. I went through the same blackness that Marc had described and I got just as sick. But I didn't pass out. I saw the dark lighten and the sun and sky swim back. The machine stopped. And I stood still and looked out at death and destruction.

I don't know by how much I'd missed Marc's time here in the future. But the killers had come and gone. The city that Marc had described was a tumbled, smashed heap of rubble. Parts of the great buildings still looked up, but the rubble had covered almost everything with broken stone, brick, glass and steel. And nothing moved in all that wilderness of wreckage. It was worse than Hiroshima.

I lifted the bar and got out. Glass

crunched underfoot. I moved stiffly, like a man in a dream, picking my way over the heaps of rock which had once been buildings. I found a way that was fairly clear and I followed my nose. There was utter silence here. Not a voice, not a scream, not a sound of bird or insect.

Walking, I came to a little triangular park where no rubble had fallen. The trees were untouched, the grass was green, the flower-beds were bright with color. It was a stamp-sized oasis in that terrible desert of destruction. And right in the middle of it was a stone pedestal. Something had been on top, but it was empty now. I saw letters carved on the stone.

MARC CONRAD

Hero of the first successful flight through time, from the year 1955 to 2455. His courage and daring opened vast new horizons to release the earth-bound feet of man.

This was where his statue had been. The bronze bust had rested on top of the stone here. I put my hand on it. It was like a breath of Marc lying dead there in his room five hundred years away.

This stone was very old. The carving was dim and weather-beaten. I wondered how long it had been here. And all at once I felt horribly alone and small and scared. I was the only living thing in this dead city. For endless miles around me the desolation stretched. Only Marc—his memory—and I stood here alone. There was nothing for me to do here. I turned and went back to the machine. . . .

ON THE return trip I missed by six months. Maybe it was bum navigating, maybe there was that much error in the machine. Anyway, when I got back there were two cops on guard in the room and only one of the graybeards.

"We thought you were gone for

sure," they told me.

"I went to see," I said. "Every word he recorded was true. I saw that city he described—wiped out. Every living thing buried. I saw the monument put up for him. Am I under arrest?"

"I guess not," the cop said uncomfortably.

"We were talking about putting up a memorial to you, too," the graybeard said. "Marc Conrad was a hero, and we were making up our minds about you. Come and let us show you."

They took me in a car and brought me to a brand-new park. It was small and triangular, with young trees planted around it and flower-beds bright with color. And in the center was a stone pedestal with carving on it. On top was the bronze head of Marc Conrad.

I felt a little cold touch of fear. I was afraid to go up and look at it, but I moved my legs and made them take me there. And I read:

MARC CONRAD

Hero of the first successful flight through time, from the year 1955 to 2455. His courage and daring opened vast new horizons to release the earth-bound feet of man.

It was the same. I had just touched this stone, five hundred years old in the future. Now I was touching it brand-new, with the carving in it still fresh and bright. But there was something worse. I lifted my eyes to the bronze head.

"This—this head," I croaked. "This is the one Marc brought back?"

"Yes," they told me.

"Then where did it come from?" I shouted.

They stared at me.

"Look," I said, getting a grip on my sanity. "Marc went into the future. He found this park, just as you see it here. The stone pedestal was here, the bronze head on top. He took

the head off and brought it back. So you make the park and make the pedestal and put the bronze on top. But *who made the head?*"

They looked at me and I felt things start to swim again.

"Don't you see?" I begged. "There's something missing! The sculptor is missing. Marc had to bring his bronze back from the future in order for you to put it here, so he could go into the future and find it waiting for him. But where did it come from? Where in that time link is the man who made it? Don't you see that there's a piece missing from the time cycle?"

They saw what I meant all right. But they hadn't seen that park in the future as I had, so they had the choice of believing or not believing me. To protect their own sanity, they chose not to believe me.

I didn't have that choice. I had seen the park. I knew that Marc had brought that head back from the future into the past so it could be put in place and stay there and wait for

him to go into the future again and find it. And the whole crazy cycle was going round and round in time forever, just as it was going round and round in my head.

I'm not doing much these days. I'm just sitting and thinking. I'm wondering how this city will change in the next five hundred years, grow into a magnificent place of monoliths and parks. And then suddenly a strange machine will come out of the past and Marc Conrad will be here again—though he is dead and has been dead five hundred years.

Marc will stay nine days and take the head and go back to the past, back with his crushed ribs to die. And then I'll come here again, though I too will have been dead a long time, and presently follow Marc back to find them putting up the pedestal in the new little park. And once again that maddening cycle will begin, to go on and on forever as long as time spins its threads.

I sit here and think about it and wonder if I will go mad.



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SPACE STORIES



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Nothing Sirius

By FREDRIC BROWN

They could have a planet to themselves, but who wanted it?

PLEASANTLY, I was taking the coins out of the machines and counting them while Ma was entering the figures in the little red book. I called them out as usual. Nice figures they were.

Yes, we'd had a good play on both of the Sirius planets, Freda and Thor. Especially on Thor. Those little Earth colonies out there are starved to death for entertainment of any kind, and money doesn't mean a

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thing to them. They'd stood in line to get into our tent and push their coins into the machines. So even with the plenty high expense of the trip, we'd done all right by ourselves.

Yes, they were right comforting, those figures Ma was entering. 'Course she'd add them up wrong, but then Ellen would straighten it out when Ma finally gave up. Ellen's good at figures, and got a good one herself, even if I do say it of my own daughter. Credit for that goes to Ma, anyway, not to me. I'm built on the general lines of a space tug.

I put back the coin-box of the Rocket Race and looked up. "Ma," I started to say. Then the door of the pilot's compartment opened and John Lane stood there. Ellen, across the table from Ma, put down her hook and looked up too. She was all eyes and they were shining.

Johnny saluted smartly, the regulation salute with which a private-ship pilot is supposed to honor the owner and captain of the ship. It always got under my skin, that salute, but I couldn't talk him out of it because the rules said he should do it.

He said, "Object ahead, Captain Wherry."

"Object?" I queried. "What kind of object?"

You see, from Johnny's voice and Johnny's face you couldn't guess whether it meant anything or not. Mars City Polytech trains 'em to be strictly deadpan and Johnny had graduated magna cum laude. He's a nice kid but he'd announce the end of the world in the same tone of voice he'd use to announce dinner. If it was a pilot's job to announce dinner.

"It seems to be a planet, sir," was all he said.

Quite a while it took for his words to sink in.

"A planet?" I asked not particularly brilliantly. I stared at him, hoping that he'd been drinking or something. Not because I had any objections to his seeing a planet

sober, but because if Johnny ever unbent to the stage of taking a good drink, the alky would probably dissolve some of the starch out of his backbone. Then I'd have someone to swap stories with. It gets lonesome traveling through space with two women and a conscientious Polytech grad who follows the rules.

"A planet, sir. An object of planetary dimensions, I should say. Diameter three thousand miles, distance two million, course apparently an orbit about Sirius A."

"Johnny," I began, "we're inside the orbit of Thor, which is Sirius I, which means it's the first planet of Sirius and how can there be a planet inside of that? You wouldn't be kidding me, Johnny?"

"You may inspect the teleplate, sir, and check my calculations," he replied stiffly.

Well, I got up and went into the pilot's compartment. There was a disc in the center of the teleplate, all right. So Johnny wasn't seeing things. Checking his calculations was something else again. My mathematics end at counting coins out of coin machines. But I was willing to take his word for it.

"Johnny," I almost shouted, "we've discovered a new planet. Ain't that something?"

"Yes, sir," he commented, in his usual, matter-of-fact voice.

IT WAS something, but not much. I mean, the Sirius system hasn't been colonized long and it wasn't too surprising that a little three thousand mile planet hadn't been noticed yet. Especially as the orbits swing high, wide and handsome on Thor and Freda. So far out, they'd be colder than Pluto if the Dog Star wasn't twenty-six times as bright as Sol.

There hadn't been room for Ma and Ellen to follow us into the pilot's compartment, but they stood looking in at the doorway and I moved to

one side so they could see the disc in the viewplate.

"How soon do we get there, Johnny?" Ma wanted to know.

"Our point of nearest approach on this course will be within an hour, Mrs. Wherry," he replied. "We come within half a million miles of it."

"Oh, do we?" I wanted to know.

"Unless, sir, you think it advisable to change course and give it more clearance."

I gave clearance to my throat instead and looked at Ma and Ellen and saw it would be okay by them. "Johnny," I continued, "we're going to give it less clearance. I've always hankered to see a new planet all to myself. We're going to land there."

He said, "Yes, sir," and saluted, but there was, I thought, disapproval in his eyes. Oh, he'd have had cause for it if there had been. You never know what you'll run into bursting into virgin territory out here. A cargo of canvas and slot-machines isn't the proper equipment for exploring, now is it?

But the Perfect Pilot never questions an owner's orders, doggone him! Johnny sat down and started punching keys on the calculator and we eased out to let him do it.

"Ma," I said, "I'm a blamed fool."

"You would be if you weren't," she came back. I grinned when I got that sorted out, and looked at Ellen.

But she wasn't looking at me. She had that dreamy look in her eyes again. It made me want to go into the pilot's compartment and take a poke at Johnny to see if it would wake him up.

"Listen, honey," I said, "that Johnny—"

But something burned the side of my face and I knew it was Ma looking at me, so I shut up. I got out a deck of cards and played solitaire until we landed.

Johnny popped out of the pilot's compartment. And saluted.

"Landed, sir. Atmosphere one-oh-

sixteen on the gauge."

"And what," Ellen asked, "does that mean in English?"

"It's breatheable, Miss Wherry. A bit high in nitrogen and low in oxygen compared to Earth air, but nevertheless breatheable."

He was a caution, that young man was, when it came to being precise.

"Then what are we waiting for?" I wanted to know.

"Your orders, sir."

"Shucks with my orders, Johnny. Let's get the door open and get going."

He saluted, and we got the door open. That was that. Johnny stepped out first, strapping on a pair of heat-ejectors as he went. The rest of us were right behind him.

OUTSIDE it was cool, but not cold. The landscape looked just like Thor, with bare rolling hills of hard-baked, greenish clay. There was plant life, a brownish bushy stuff that looked something like tumbleweed.

I took a look up to gauge the time and Sirius was almost at the zenith, which meant Johnny had landed us smack in the middle of the day side.

"Got any idea, Johnny," I asked, "what the period of rotation is?"

"I had time for only a rough check, sir. It came out twenty-one hours, seventeen and a half minutes."

Rough check, he had said!

Ma answered. "That's rough enough for us. Gives us time for a walk and what are we waiting for?"

"For the ceremony, Ma," I told her. "We got to name the place, don't we? And where did you put that bottle of champagne we were saving for my birthday? I reckon this is a more important occasion."

She told me where, and I went and got it.

"Got any suggestions for a name, Johnny?" I asked. "You saw it first."

"No, sir."

I said, "Trouble is that Thor and

Freda are wrong now. I mean Thor is Sirius I and Freda is Sirius II, and this orbit is inside theirs, so they ought to be 'two' and 'three' respectively. Or else this ought to be Sirius 0. Which means it's Nothing Sirius."

Ellen smiled, and I think Johnny would have except that it would have been undignified, while Ma just grunted. "William—" she began, and would have gone on in that vein if something hadn't happened.

Something looked up over the top of the nearest hill. Ma was the only one facing that way and she let out a whoop and grabbed me. Then we all turned and looked. It was the head of something that looked like an ostrich, only it must have been bigger than an elephant. Also there was a collar and a blue polka-dot bow tie around the thin neck of the critter, and it wore a hat. The hat was bright yellow and had a long purple feather. The thing looked at us a minute, quizzically and then pulled its head back.

Nope of us said anything for a minute, and then I took a deep breath.

"That," I said, "tears it..Planet, I dub thee *Nothing Sirius*."

I bent down and hit the champagne bottle against the clay, but it just dented the clay and wouldn't break. I tried again and looked around for a rock to hit it on. There wasn't any rock.

I took out a corkscrew from my pocket and opened the bottle instead. We all had a drink except Johnny, who doesn't drink or smoke. Me, I had a good long one. Then I poured a brief libation on the ground and recocked the bottle. I had a hunch I might need it again, and maybe need it worse than the planet did. There was lots of whisky in the ship and some Martian greenbrew, but no more champagne.

I said, "Well, here we go."

I caught Johnny's eye and he said, "Do you think it wise, sir, in view of

the fact that there are—uh—inhabitants?"

"Inhabitants?" I interrupted him. "Johnny, whatever that thing that stuck its head over the hill was, it wasn't an inhabitant. And if it pops up again, I'll conk it with this bottle."

But just the same, before we started out I went inside the *Chitterling* and got a couple more heatjectors. I stuck one in my belt and gave Ellen the other. Ellen's a better shot than I am, but Ma couldn't hit the side of an administration building at ten paces with a spraygun, so I didn't give her one.

WE STARTED off, and sort of by mutual consent, we went the other direction from where we'd seen the whatever-it-was. The hills all looked alike for a while and as soon as we were over the first one, we were out of sight of the *Chitterling*. I noticed Johnny looking at his wrist-compass every couple of minutes, and knew he'd know the way home.

Nothing happened for three hills and then Ma said, "Look," and we looked.

About twenty yards off to our left there was a purple bush. There was a buzzing sound coming from it. The buzzing sound came from a lot of things that were flying around the bush. They looked like birds until you looked a second time and then you saw that their wings weren't moving. But they zoomed up and down and around just the same. I tried to look at their heads, but where their heads ought to be there was just a blur. A circular blur.

"They got propellers," Ma said. "Like old-fashioned airships used to have."

It did look that way.

I looked at Johnny and he looked at me, and we started over toward that bush. But the birds, or whatever, flew away quick, the minute we took a step. They skimmed off low to the

ground, and were out of sight in a minute.

We started off again, none of us saying anything, and Ellen came up and walked alongside me. We were just far enough ahead to be out of earshot, and she said, "Pop—"

And didn't go on with it until I answered, "What kid?"

"Nothing," she replied sorrowful-like. "Skip it."

So of course I knew what she'd wanted to talk about, but I couldn't think of anything helpful to say except to cuss out Mars Polytech and that wouldn't have done any good. Mars Polytech has one trouble only. It's too darned good for its own good, and so are its ramrods of graduates. After a dozen years or so outside, though, some of them manage to unbend and limber up.

But Johnny hadn't been out that long, by eleven years or so. The chance to pilot the *Chitterling* had been a break for him, of course, as his first job. A few years with us and he'd be qualified to skipper something bigger. He'd qualify to jump up there a lot faster than if he'd had to start in as a minor officer on a bigger ship.

Only trouble was that he was too good-looking and didn't know it. He didn't know anything they hadn't taught him at Polytech and all they'd taught him there was math and astrology and how to salute, and they hadn't taught him how not to.

"Ellen—" I started to say.

"Yes, Pop?"

"Uh—nothing. Skip it." I hadn't meant to say that at all, but suddenly she grinned at me, and I grinned back, and it was just like we'd talked the whole thing over. True, we hadn't got anywhere, but then we wouldn't have even if we had, if you know what I mean, and I don't think you do.

So just then we came to the top of a small rise, and Ellen and I stopped because just ahead of us was the

blank end of a paved street.

An ordinary, every day plastipaved street just like you'd see in any city on Earth, with curb and sidewalk and gutters and the painted traffic-line down the middle. Only it ran out to nowhere, where we stood, and, at least until it went over the top of the next rise, there wasn't a house or a vehicle or a creature on it.

I looked at Ellen and she looked at me, and then we both looked at Ma and Johnny Lane, who had just caught up to us. I said, "What is it, Johnny?"

"It seems to be a street, sir."

HE CAUGHT the look I was giving him and flushed a little. He bent over and examined the paving closely, and when he straightened up his eyes were even more surprised. I queried, "Well, what is it, caramel icing?"

"It's permaplast, sir. We aren't the discoverers of this planet, because that stuff's an Earth product."

"Um," I sort of mumbled, "couldn't the natives here have discovered the same process? The same—uh—ingredients might be available."

"Yes, sir. But the blocks are trademarked, if you'll look closely."

I replied, "Couldn't the natives have—" Then I shut up because even I saw how silly that was. But it's tough to think your party has discovered a new planet and then have Earth-trademarked paving bricks on the first street you come to. "But what's a street doing here at all?" I wanted to know.

"There's only one way to find out," said Ma. "So what are we standing here for?"

So we pushed on, and on the next rise we saw a building. A two-story red brick with a sign on it that read, "Bon Ton Restaurant." It was in Old English script lettering.

I said, "I'll be a—" But Ma clapped her hand over my mouth before I could finish, which was maybe just

as well for what I'd been going to say had been quite inadequate. There was the building only a hundred yards ahead, facing us at a sharp turn in the street.

I started walking faster, and I got there first by a few paces. I opened the door, and started to walk in. Then I stopped cold on the doorstep, because there wasn't any "in" to that building. It was a false front, like a cinema setting, and all you could see through the door was more of those rolling, greenish hills.

I stepped back and looked up at the "Bon-Ton Restaurant" sign, and the others walked up and looked in the doorway, which I'd left open. They came back and we just stood there until Ma got impatient and said, "Well, what are you going to do?"

"What do you want me to do?" I wanted to know. "Go in and order you a lobster dinner? With champagne—hey, I forgot!"

The champagne bottle was still in my jacket pocket and I took it out and passed it to Ma first and then to Ellen, and then I finished what was left of it, and I drank it too fast, because the bubbles tickled my nose and made me sneeze.

I felt ready for anything, though, and I took another walk through the doorway of the building that wasn't there. Maybe, I figured, I could see some sign of how recently it had been put up, or something. But there weren't any signs that I could see. The inside—or rather the back of the front, if you know what I'm talking about, was smooth and plain like a sheet of glass. It looked like a synthetic of some sort.

I took a look around at the ground back of it, but all I could see were a few holes that looked like insect holes. And that's what they must have been because there was a big, black cockroach sitting (or standing, because how can you tell whether a cockroach is sitting or standing?)

by one of them. I took a step closer and he popped down the hole.

I felt a little better as I went front through the doorway. I said, "Ma, I saw a cockroach. And you know what was peculiar about it?"

"What?" said Ma.

"Nothing," I told her. "That's the peculiar thing. There was nothing peculiar. Here the ostriches wear hats and the birds have propellers and the streets go nowhere and the houses haven't any backs to them, but that cockroach didn't even have feathers."

"Are you sure?" Ellen wanted to know.

"Sure I'm sure. Well, let's take the next rise and see what's over it."

We went, and we saw. Down in between that hill and the next, the road took another sharp turn, and facing us was the front view of a tent with a big banner that said, "Penny Arcade."

THIS time I didn't even break stride. I said, "They copied that banner from the show Sam Heide-man used to have. Remember Sam, and the old days, Ma?"

"That drunken no-good?" asked Ma.

"Why, you liked him, too, Ma."

"Yes, and I liked you, but that doesn't prove that you aren't or that he isn't—"

"Why, Ma," I interrupted. But by that time we were right in front of the tent. Looked like real canvas because it billowed gently. I said, "I haven't got the heart. Who wants to look through this time?"

But Ma already had her head through the flap of the tent. I heard her say, "Why, hello Sam, you old soak."

I said, "Ma, quit kidding or I'll—" But by that time I was past her and inside the tent, and it was a tent, all four sides of one and a good big one at that. And it was lined with the old familiar coin machines. There, count-

ing coins in the change booth was Sam Heideman, looking up with almost as much surprise on his face as there must have been in mine.

He said, "Pop Wherry! I'll be a dirty name." Only he didn't say "dirty name"—but he didn't get around to apologizing to Ma and Ellen for that until he and I had pounded each other's backs and then he'd shaken hands around and been introduced to Johnny Lane.

It was just like old times on the Mars and Venus carney lots. He was telling Ellen how she'd been just "so high" when he'd seen her last and did she really remember him? And then Ma sniffed.

When Ma sniffs like that, there's something to look at, and I got my eyes off good old Sam and looked at Ma and then at where Ma was looking. I didn't sniff, but I gasped.

A woman was coming forward from somewhere in the back of the tent and when I call her a woman, it's because I can't think of the right word if there is one. She was St. Cecilia and Guinevere and a Petty girl all ironed into one. She was like a sunset in New Mexico and the cold, silver moons of Mars seen from the Equatorial Gardens. She was like a Venusian valley in the spring and like Dorzalski playing the violin. She was really something!

I heard another gasp from alongside of me, and it was an unfamiliar note. Took me a second to realize why it was unfamiliar. I'd never heard Johnny Lane gasp before.

It was an effort, but I shifted my eyes for a look at his face. And I thought, "Oh-oh. Poor Ellen." For the poor boy was gone now, no question about it.

And just in time—maybe seeing Johnny helped me—I managed to remember that I'm pushing fifty and happily married. I took hold of Ma's arm and hung on.

"Sam," I said, "who on Ea—on whatever planet this is—"

Sam turned around and looked behind him. He said, "Miss Ambers, I'd like you to meet some old friends of mine just dropped in. Mrs. Wherry, this is Miss Ambers, the movie star."

Then he finished the introductions, first Ellen, then me and then Johnny. Ma and Ellen were too polite. Me, I maybe went the other way by pretending not to notice the hand Miss Ambers held out. Old as I am, I had a hunch I might forget to let it go if I took it. That's the kind of a girl she was.

Johnny did forget.

Sam was saying, "Pop, you old pirate, what are you doing here? I thought you stuck to the colonies where you'd get a play, and I sure didn't look for you to drop in on a movie set."

"A movie set!" I said. Things began to make sense, almost.

"Sure. Planetary Cinema, Inc. With me as technical adviser on carney scenes. They wanted inside shots of a penny arcade so I just brought my old stuff out of storage and set it up. All the boys are over at the base camp now."

IIGHT was just beginning to dawn on me. "And that restaurant front up the street? That's a set?" I queried.

"Sure, and the street itself. They didn't need it, but they had to film the making of it for one sequence."

"Oh," I went on. "But how about the ostrich with the bow tie, and the birds with the propellers? They couldn't have been movie props. Or could they?" I'd heard that Planetary Cinema, Inc., did some pretty impossible things.

Sam shook his head a bit blankly. "Nope, you must have seen some of the local fauna. There are a few but not many, and they don't get in that way."

Ma said, "Look here, Sam Heideman, how come if this planet has

been discovered, we hadn't heard about it? How long has it been known, and what's it all about?"

"Man named Wilkins discovered this planet ten years ago," Sam chuckled. "Reported it to the Council, but before it got publicized, Planetary Cinema got wind of it and offered the Council a whooping rental for the place on the condition that its existence be kept secret. As there aren't any minerals or anything of value here and the soil ain't worth a whoop, the Council rented it to them on those terms."

"But why secret?"

"No visitors, no distractions, not to mention the jump on their competitors. All the big movie companies spy on one another and swipe each other's ideas. You should know that by now. Here they got all the space they want and can work in peace and privacy."

"What'll they do about us finding the place?" I wanted to know.

Sam chuckled again. "Guess they'll entertain you royally now that you're here and try to persuade you to keep it under your hat. You'll probably get a free pass for life to all the Planetary Cinema theaters, too."

He went over to a cabinet and came back with a tray of bottles and glasses. Ma and Ellen declined, but Sam and I had a couple apiece, and it was good stuff. Johnny and Miss Ambers were over in a corner of the tent whispering together so earnestly that we didn't bother them, especially when I told Sam that Johnny didn't drink.

Johnny still had hold of her hand and was gazing into her eyes like a sick pup. I noticed Ellen moved around so she was looking the other way and didn't have to watch. I felt sorry for her, but there wasn't anything I could do. Something like that just happens if it happens. And if I'd been Johnny's age and it hadn't been for Ma—

But I saw Ma was getting impatient and edgy and after a few yarns back and forth, I said we'd better get back to the ship and get dressed up, if we were due to be entertained royally. Then we'd move the ship in closer. I reckoned we could spare a few days on Nothing Sirius. I left Sam in stitches by telling him how and why we'd named the planet that, after a look at the local fauna.

Then I gently pried Johnny loose from the movie star and led him outside. It wasn't easy. There was a blank, blissful expression on his face, and he'd even forgotten to salute me when I'd spoken to him. He hadn't called me "sir" either. In fact, he didn't say anything at all.

Neither did any of the rest of us, walking up the street.

There was something knocking at my mind, and I couldn't figure out what it was. There was something wrong, something that didn't make sense.

Ma was worried, too. Finally I heard her say, "Pop, is Sam right about them entertaining us? I mean, if they really want to keep this place a secret, wouldn't they maybe—"

"No, they wouldn't," I answered, maybe a bit snappishly. That wasn't what I was worried about, though.

I looked down at that new and perfect road, and there was something about it I didn't like. I diagonaled over to the curb and walked along that, looking down at the greenish soil beyond, but there wasn't much to see except more holes and more bugs like the one I'd seen back at the Bon Ton restaurant.

Maybe they weren't cockroaches, unless the cinema company had brought them. But they were near enough like cockroaches for all practical purposes.

And they still didn't have propellers or wheels or bow-ties or feathers. They were just plain cockroaches.

I stepped off the paving and tried to step on one or two of them, but they got away and got down holes. They were plenty fast and shifty on their feet.

I got back on the road and walked with Ma. When she asked, "What were you doing?" I answered, "Nothing."

ELLEN was walking along not talking, and keeping her face a studious blank. I could guess what she was thinking, and I wished that something could be done about it. The only thing I could think of was to decide to stay on Earth a while at the end of this trip and give her a chance to get over Johnny by meeting a lot of other young sprigs. Maybe even finding one she liked.

Johnny was walking along in a daze. He was gone, all right, and he'd fallen with awful suddenness, like guys like that always do. Oh, maybe it wasn't love but was just infatuation, but right now he probably didn't know what planet he was on.

We were over the first rise now, out of sight of Sam's tent.

"Pop, did you see any movie cameras around?" Ma asked suddenly.

"Nope, but those things cost millions. They don't leave them setting around loose when they're not being used."

Ahead of us was the front of that restaurant. It looked funny as the devil from a side view, walking toward it from this direction. Nothing in sight but that, and green clay hills, and the crazy street we were walking on.

There weren't any cockroaches on the street. Seemed as though they never got up on it or crossed it.

When I spoke to Johnny, he didn't seem to hear me, and I decided not to say it because I didn't know what I was going to say. There was still that something knocking at my mind. Something that made less sense than anything else.

It got stronger and stronger and it was driving me crazy. The whole thing seemed more insane than absurd. I got to wishing I had another drink. Sirius A was getting down toward the horizon, but it was still plenty hot.

I even began to wish I had a drink of water. Ma looked tired, too. "Let's stop for a rest, we're about halfway back," I said to her.

We stopped. It was right in front of the Bon Ton, and I looked up at the sign and grinned. "Johnny, will you go in and order dinner for us?" I asked our precise young man.

He saluted and replied, "Yes, sir," then started for the door. He suddenly got kind of red in the face and stopped. I chuckled, but I didn't rub it in by saying anything else.

Ma and Ellen sat down on the curb.

I walked around back of the restaurant front and it hadn't changed any. Smooth like glass on the other side. The same cockroach was still by the same hole.

I said, "Hello, there," but it didn't answer, so I tried to step on it but it was too fast for me. I noticed something funny. It started for the hole the second I decided to step on it, even before I had actually moved a muscle.

I went around to the front again, and leaned up against the brick wall. It was nice and solid to lean against.

I took a cigar out of my pocket and started to light it, but I dropped the match. Almost, I knew what was wrong.

Something about Sam Heideman. "Ma," I said, and she turned and looked up at me.

"Ma, isn't Sam Heideman d—?" And then, with utterly appalling suddenness, I wasn't leaning against a wall any more, because the wall just wasn't there and I was falling backward.

I picked myself up off the greenish clay. Ma and Ellen were getting up, too, from sitting down hard on the

ground because the curb they'd been sitting on wasn't there any more either.

THERE wasn't a sign of the street we'd been walking on, or of the Bon Ton restaurant I'd been leaning against. There wasn't anything but greenish hills like we'd first seen from the door of the *Chitterling*.

That fall had jolted me plenty, and I was mad. I wanted something to take out my mad on and I looked around to see if my friend the cockroach had come up in smoke along with the wall and street. He hadn't. I tried for him again, and missed again.

Then I looked around at the others. Ma looked as mad as I felt. She was rubbing herself where she'd landed on the ground. Johnny looked startled and like he wanted to cuss but didn't know how.

Ellen didn't look anything. She just looked, down at where the street ought to be and over toward me and where the Bon Ton ought to be, then back toward where we'd come from as though wondering whether the tent was still back there.

"It isn't," I said.

Ma asked, "It isn't what?"

"Isn't there," I explained.

Ma glowered at me. "What isn't where?"

"The tent," I went on, a bit peeved.

"The movie company. The whole shebang. And especially Sam Heideman. It was when I remembered about Sam that the street went out from under us."

"Remembered what about Sam?"

"He's dead. Don't you remember six years ago, in New York, when we were reading some old copies of *Interplanetary Variety* and came across his obit? Sam Heideman's dead, so he wasn't there. None of it was there. And the minute I realized that, they pulled it out from under us."

"They? What do you mean 'they'?"

Pop Wherry? Who is they?"

"You mean who *are* they?" I said, but the look Ma gave me made me wince. "Let's not talk here," I went on. "Let's get back to the ship as quick as we can, first. You can lead us there, Johnny, without the street?"

He nodded, forgetting to salute or "sir" me. We started off, none of us talking.

After we got to where the end of the street had been, we could see our footprints, and the going was easy. We passed the rise where the purple bush had been that the birds with propellers had been flying around but the birds weren't there now. Neither was the purple bush.

I had a pretty good hunch, too, that we wouldn't see any more elephant-sized ostriches in bow ties. We didn't.

But the *Chitterling* was there, thank heaven. We saw it from the last rise, and it was just as we'd left it. It looked like home, and we started to walk faster.

I opened the door and stood aside for Ma and Ellen to go in first. Ma had just got her foot on the first rung when we heard the voice. It said, "We bid you farewell."

I LOOKED around—all of us looked around—but there wasn't anybody or anything doing the talking. Well, there hadn't been any street either. Or one-sided restaurant or propeller-birds.

"We bid you farewell, too. And the hell with you," I answered, letting 'em know I meant it.

I motioned to Ma to go on into the ship. The sooner I was out of this place, the better I'd like it.

But the voice said: "Wait." and there was something about it that made us wait. "We wish to explain, so you will not return."

Nothing had been further from my mind, but I said, "why not?"

"Your civilization is not compati-

ble with ours. We have studied your minds to make sure. We projected images from images we found in your minds, to study your reactions to them. Our first images, our thought projections, were confused. But we understood your minds well by the time you reached the farthest point of your walk. We were able to project beings similar to yourselves."

"Sam Heideman yeah," I said. "But how about the da—the woman? She couldn't have been in the memory of any of us because we didn't know her."

"She was a composite—what you would call an idealization. That, however, does not matter. By studying you, we learned that your civilization concerns itself with things, ours with thoughts. Neither of us has anything to offer the other. No good could come through interchange whereas much harm might. Our planet has no material resources that would interest your race.

I had to agree to that, looking out over that monotonous rolling green clay. It supported those tumbleweed-like bushes, a few of them, but didn't look as though it would raise anything else. As for minerals, I hadn't even seen a pebble.

"Right you are," I shouted back. "Any planet that raises nothing but tumbleweeds and cockroaches can keep itself, as far as we are concerned. So—" Then something dawned on me. "Hey, just a minute. There must be something else besides weeds and roaches, or who the hell am I talking to?"

"You are talking," replied the voice, "to what you call cockroaches, which is another point of incompatibility between us. To be more precise, you are talking to a thought-projected voice, but we are projecting it. And let me assure you of one thing that you are as physically repugnant to us as we are to you."

I looked down then and saw them, three of them, ready to pop in holes

if I made a move. Back inside the ship, I said, "Johnny, blast off."

He saluted and said, "Yes, sir," and went into the pilot's compartment and shut the door. His face had been studiously blank. He didn't come out until we were on automatic course with Sirius just a dwindling star behind us. Ellen had gone to her room. Ma and I were playing cribbage.

"May I go off duty, sir?" Johnny asked and walked stiffly to his room when I answered. "Sure."

After a while, Ma and I turned in. A while after that we heard the noises. I got up to investigate.

I came back grinning. "Everything's okay, Ma," I said. "It's Johnny. He's as drunk as a hootowl."

"What's wonderful about Johnny getting drunk? Are you?"

"No," I admitted, regretfully maybe, "But Ma—he told me to go to blazes. And without saluting. Me, the owner of the ship."

Ma just looked at me. Sometimes women are smart, but sometimes they're pretty dumb.

"Listen, he isn't going to keep on getting drunk. This is just an occasion. Can't you see what happened to his pride and his dignity?"

"You mean because he—"

"Because he fell in love with the thought projection of a cockroach," I pointed out. "Or thought he did. He has to get drunk once to forget that, and from now on, after he sobers up, he's going to be human. I'll bet on it. And I'll bet, too, that once he's human he's going to see Ellen and realize how pretty she is. I'll even bet he's head-over-heels before we get back to Earth."

"If you're right—"

"I am right," I told her gleefully. "I'll get a bottle and we'll drink a toast to it. To Nothing Sirius."

And, for once, I was right. Johnny and Ellen were engaged before we got near enough to the Solar System to start decelerating.

• • •

*At first she wanted a household pet —
then she decided that . . .*

JERRY IS

1

DON'T blame the Martians. The human race would have developed plasto-biology in any case. Look at the older registered Kennel Club breeds—glandular giants like the St. Bernard and the Great Dane, silly little atrocities like the Chihuahua and the Pekingese. Consider fancy goldfish.

The damage was done when Dr. Morgan produced new breeds of fruit flies by kicking around their chromosomes with X-rays. After that, the second generation of the Hiroshima survivors did not teach us anything new; those luckless monstrosities only publicized what

was standard genetic knowledge.

Mr. and Mrs. Bronson van Vogel did not have social reform in mind when they went to the Phoenix Breeding Ranch; Mr. van Vogel simply wanted to buy a Pegasus. He had mentioned it at breakfast.

"Are you tied up this morning, my dear?"

"Not especially. Why?"

"I'd like to run out to Arizona and order a Pegasus designed."

"A Pegasus? A flying horse? Why, my sweet?"

He grinned. "Just for fun. Pudgy Hartmann was around the club yesterday with a six-legged dachshund

A NOVELET



A MAN

By ROBERT A. HEINLEIN

—must have been over a yard long. It was clever, but he swanked so much I want to give him something to stare at. Imagine, Martha—landing on the Club 'copter platform on a winged horse. That'll snap his eyes back!"

She turned her eyes from the Jersey shore to look indulgently at her husband. She was not fooled; this would be expensive. But Brownie was such a dear!

"When do we start?"

They landed two hours earlier

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than they started. The airsign read, in letters fifty feet high:

PHOENIX BREEDING RANCH
Controlled Genetics—Licensed Labor
Contractors

"'Labor Contractors'?" she read. "I thought this place was used just to burbank new animals."

"They both design and produce," he explained importantly. "They distribute through the mother corporation 'Workers.' You ought to know: you own a big chunk of Workers common."

"You mean I own a bunch of apes? Really?"

"Perhaps I didn't tell you. Haskell and I—" He leaned forward and informed the field that he would land manually; he was a bit proud of his piloting.

He switched off the robot and added, briefly as his attention was taken up by herding the ship down. "Haskell and I have been plowing your General Atomics dividends back into Workers, Inc. Good diversification—still plenty of dirty work for the anthropoids to do." He slapped the keys; the scream of the nose jets stopped conversation.

Bronson had called the manager in flight; they were met—not with red carpet, canopy and footmen, though the manager strove to give that impression.

"Mr. van Vogel? And Mrs. van Vogel! We are honored indeed!"

He ushered them into a tiny, luxurious unicar; they jeeped off the field, up a ramp, and into the lobby of the administration building. The manager, Mr. Blakesly, did not relax until he had seated them around a fountain in the lounge of his offices, struck cigarettes for them, and provided tall, cool drinks.

BRONSON VAN VOGEL was bored by the attention, as it was obviously inspired by his wife's Dun & Bradstreet rating; ten stars, a sunburst and heavenly music. He pre-

ferred people who could convince him that he had invented the Briggs fortune, instead of marrying it.

"This is business, Blakesly. I've an order for you."

"So? Well, our facilities are at your disposal. What would you like, sir?"

"I want you to make me a Pegasus."

"A Pegasus? A flying horse?"

"Exactly."

Blakesly pursed his lips. "You seriously want a horse that will fly? An animal like the mythical Pegasus?"

"Yes, yes—that's what I said."

"You embarrass me, Mr. van Vogel. I assume you want a unique gift for your lady. How about a mid-get elephant, twenty inches high, perfectly housebroken, and able to read and write? He holds the stylus in his trunk—very cunning."

"Does he talk?" demanded Mrs. van Vogel.

"Well, now, my dear lady, his voice box, you know—and his tongue—he was not designed for speech. If you insist on it, I will see what our plasticians can do."

"Now, Martha—"

"You can have your Pegasus, Brownie, but I think I may want this toy elephant. May I see him?"

"Most surely. Hartstone!"

The air answered Blakesly. "Yes, boss?"

"Bring Napoleon to my lounge."

"Right away, sir."

"Now about your Pegasus, Mr. van Vogel. I see difficulties and I need expert advice. Dr. Cargrew is the real heart of this organization, the most eminent bio-designer—of terrestrial origin, of course—on the world today." He raised his voice to actuate relays. "Dr. Cargrew!"

"What is it, Mr. Blakesly?"

Doctor, will you favor me by coming to my office?"

"I'm busy. Later."

Mr. Blakesly excused himself,

went into his inner office, then returned to say that Dr. Cargrew would be in shortly. In the meantime Napoleon showed up. The proportions of his noble ancestors had been preserved in miniature; he looked like a statuette of an elephant, come amazingly to life.

He took three measured steps into the lounge, then saluted them each with his trunk. In saluting Mrs. van Vogel he dropped on his knees as well.

"Oh, how cute!" she gurgled. "Come here, Napoleon."

The elephant looked at Blakesly, who nodded. Napoleon ambled over and laid his trunk across her lap. She scratched his ears; he moaned contentedly.

"Show the lady how you can write," ordered Blakesly. "Fetch your things from my room."

Napoleon waited while she finished treating a particularly satisfying itch, then oozed away to return shortly with several sheets of heavy white paper and an oversize pencil. He spread a sheet in front of Mrs. van Vogel, held it down daintily with a fore foot, grasped the pencil with his trunk finger, and printed in large, shaky letters:

I LIKE YOU

"The darling!" She dropped to her knees and put her arms around his neck. "I simply must have him. How much is he?"

"Napoleon is part of a limited edition of six," Blakesly said carefully. "Do you want an exclusive model, or may the others be sold?"

"Oh, I don't care. I just want Napie. Can I write him a note?"

"Certainly, Mrs. van Vogel. Print large letters and use Basic English. Napoleon knows most of it. His price, non-exclusive, is \$350,000. That includes five years salary for his attending veterinary."

"Give the gentleman a check, Brownie," she said over her shoulder.

"But, Martha—" he protested. "Don't be tiresome, Brownie." She turned back to her pet and began printing. She hardly looked up when Dr. Cargrew came in.

Cargrew was a chilly figure in white overalls and skull cap. He shook hands brusquely, struck a cigarette and sat down. Blakesly explained.

Cargrew shook his head. "It's a physical impossibility."

VAN VOGEL stood up. "I can see," he said distantly, "that I should have taken my custom to NuLife Laboratories. I came here because we have a financial interest in this firm and because I was naive enough to believe the claims of your advertisements."

"Siddown, young man!" Cargrew ordered. "Take your trade to those thumb-fingered idiots if you wish—but I warn you they couldn't grow wings on a grasshopper. First you listen to me.

"We can grow anything and make it live. I can make you a living thing—I won't call it an animal—the size and shape of that table over there. It wouldn't be good for anything, but it would be alive. It would digest food, use chemical energy, give off excretions, and display irritability. But it would be a silly piece of manipulation. Mechanically a table and an animal are two different things. Their functions are different, so their shapes are different. Now I can make you a winged horse."

"You just said you couldn't."

"Don't interrupt. I can make a winged horse that will look just like the picture in the fairy stories. If you want to pay for it; we'll make it—we're in business. But it won't be able to fly."

"Why not?"

"Because it's not built for flying. The ancient who dreamed up that myth knew nothing about aerodynamics and still less about biology. He stuck wings on a horse—just

stuck them on, thumbtacks and glue. But that doesn't make a flying machine. Remember, son, that an animal is a machine, primarily a heat engine with a control system to operate levers and hydraulic system, according to definite engineering laws. You savvy aerodynamics?"

"Well, I'm a pilot."

"Hummmph! Well, try to understand this. A horse hasn't got the heat engine for flight. He's a hay-burner and that's not efficient. We might mess around with horse's insides so that he could live on a diet of nothing but sugar and then he might have enough energy to fly short distances. But he still would not look like the mythical Pegasus. To anchor his flying muscles he would need a breast bone maybe ten feet long. He might have to have as much as eighty feet wing spread. Folded, his wings would cover him like a tent. You're up against the cube-square disadvantage."

"Huh?"

Cargrew gestured impatiently. "Lift goes by the square of a given dimension; dead load by the cube of the same dimension, other things being equal. I might be able to make you a Pegasus the size of a cat without distorting the proportions too much."

"No, I want one I can ride. I don't mind the wing spread and I'll put up with the big breast bone. When can I have him?"

Cargrew looked disgusted and shrugged. "I'll have to consult with B'na Kreeth." He whistled and chirped; a portion of the wall facing them dissolved and they found themselves looking into a laboratory. A Martian, life-size, showed in the forefront of the three-dimensional picture.

When the creature chirruped back at Cargrew, Mrs. van Vogel looked up, then quickly looked away. She knew it was silly but she simply could not stand the sight of Martians

—and the ones who had modified themselves to a semi-manlike form disgusted her the most.

After they had twittered and gestured at each other for a minute or two, Cargrew turned back to van Vogel. "B'na says that you should forget it; it would take too long. He wants to know how you'd like a fine unicorn, or a pair, guaranteed to breed true?"

"Unicorns are old hat. How long would the Pegasus take?"

After another squeaky-door conversation Cargrew answered, "Ten years probably, sixteen years on the guarantee."

"Ten years? That's ridiculous!"

Cargrew looked annoyed. "I thought it would take fifty, but if B'na Kreeth says that he can do it in three to five generations, then he can do it. B'na is the finest biomicrurgiston on two planets. His chromosome surgery is unequalled. After all, young man, natural processes would take upwards of a million years to achieve the same result, if it were achieved at all. Do you expect to be able to buy miracles?"

Van Vogel had the grace to look sheepish. "Excuse me, Doctor. Let's forget it. Ten years really is too long. How about the other possibility? You said you could make a picture-book Pegasus as long as I did not insist on flight. Could I ride him? On the ground?"

"Oh, certainly. No good for polo, but you could ride him."

"I'll settle for that. Ask Benny Creeth, or what ever his name is, how long it will take."

The Martian had already faded from the screen.

"I don't need to ask him," Cargrew asserted. "This is my job—purely manipulation. B'na's collaboration is required only for rearrangement and transplanting of genes—true genetic work. I can let you have the beast in eighteen months."

"Can't you do better than that?"

"What do you expect, man? It takes eleven months to grow a newborn colt. I want one month of design and planning. The embryo will be removed on the fourth day and will be developed in an extra-uterine capsule. I'll operate ten or twelve times during gestation, grafting and budding and other things you've never heard of. One year from now we'll have a baby colt, with wings. Thereafter I'll deliver to you a six months-old Pegasus."

"I'll take it."

Cargrew made some notes, then read, "One alate horse, not capable of flight and not to breed true. Basic breed your choice—I suggest a Palomino, or an Arabian. Wings designed after a condor, in white. Simulated pin feathers with a grafted fringe of quill feathers, or reasonable facsimiles." He passed the sheet over. "Initial that and we'll start in advance of formal contract."

"It's a deal," agreed van Vogel. "What is the fee?" He placed his monogram under Cargrew's.

Cargrew made further notes and handed them to Blakesly—estimates of professional man-hours, technician man-hours, purchases and overhead. He had padded the figures to subsidize his collateral research but even he raised his eyebrows at the dollars-and-cents interpretation Blakesly put on the data.

"That will be an even two million dollars."

Van Vogel hesitated; his wife had looked up at the mention of money. But she turned her attention back to the scholarly elephant.

Blakesly added hastily, "That is for an exclusive creation, of course."

poid workers. The discovery that she owned a considerable share in these sub-human creatures had intrigued her. Blakesly eagerly suggested a trip through the laboratories in which the workers were developed from true apes.

They were arranged in seven buildings, the Seven "Days of Creation." "First Day" was a large building occupied by Cargrew, his staff, his operating rooms, incubators and laboratories. Martha van Vogel stared in horrified fascination at living organs and even complete embryos, living artificial lives sustained by clever glass and metal recirculating systems and exquisite automatic machinery.

She could not appreciate the techniques; it seemed depressing. She had about decided against plastobiology when Napoleon, by tugging at her skirts, reminded her that it produced good things as well as horrors.

The building "Second Day" they did not enter; it was occupied by B'na Kreeth and his racial colleagues.

"We could not stay alive in it, you understand," Blakesly explained. Van Vogel nodded; his wife hurried on—she wanted no Martians even behind plastiglass.

From there on the buildings were for development and production of commercial workers. "Third Day" was used for the development of variations in the anthropoids to meet constantly changing labor requirements. "Fourth Day" was a very large building devoted entirely to production-line incubators for commercial types of anthropoids. Blakesly explained that they had dispensed with normal birth.

"The policy permits exact control of forced variations, such as for size, and saves hundreds of thousands of worker-hours on the part of the female anthropoids."

Martha van Vogel was delighted

II

JUST as Van Vogel was ready to return, his wife insisted on seeing the "apes," as she termed the anthro-

with "Fifth Day," the anthropoid kindergarten where the little tykes learned to talk and were conditioned to the social patterns necessary to their station in life. They worked at simple tasks, such as sorting buttons and digging holes in sand piles, with pieces of candy given as incentives for fast and accurate work.

"Sixth Day" completed the anthropoids' educations. Each learned the particular sub-trade it would practice, cleaning, digging, and especially agricultural semi-skills such as weeding, thinning and picking.

"One Nisei farmer working three neo-chimpanzees can grow as many vegetables as a dozen old-style farm hands," Blakesly asserted. "They really like to work—when we get through with them."

They admired the almost incredibly heavy tasks done by modified gorillas and stopped to gaze at the little neo-Capuchins doing high picking on prop trees, then moved on toward "Seventh Day."

This building was used for the radioactive mutation of genes and was therefore located some distance away from the others. They had to walk, as the sidewalk was being repaired; the detour took them past workers' pens and barracks. Some of the anthropoids crowded up to the wire and began calling to them:

"Sigret! Sigret! Preese, Missy! Preese, Boss! Sigret!"

"What are they saying?" Martha van Vogel inquired.

"They are asking for cigarettes," Blakesly answered in annoyed tones. "They know better, but they are like children. Here—I'll put a stop to it." He stepped up to the wire and shouted to an elderly male, "Hey! Strawboss!"

The worker addressed wore, in addition to the usual short canvas kilt, a bedraggled arm band. He turned and shuffled toward the fence.

"Strawboss," ordered Blakesly, "get these Joes away from here."

"Okay, Boss," the old fellow acknowledged and started cuffing those nearest him, "Scram, you Joes! Scram!"

"But I have some cigarettes," protested Mrs. van Vogel, "and I would gladly have given them some."

"It doesn't do to pamper them," the manager told her. "They have been taught that luxuries come only from work. I must apologize for my poor children; those in these pens are getting old and forgetting their manners."

SHE did not answer but moved further along the fence to where one old neo-chimp was pressed up against the wire, staring at them with soft, tragic eyes, like a child at a bakery window. He had taken no part in the jostling demand for tobacco and had been let alone by the strawboss.

"Would you like a cigarette?" she asked him.

"Preese, Missy."

She struck one which he accepted with fumbling grace, took a long, lung-filling drag and let the smoke trickle out his nostrils.

"Sankoo, Missy. Me Jerry."

"How do you do, Jerry?"

"Howdy, Missy." He bobbed down, bending his knees, ducking his head, and clasping his hands to his chest, all in one movement.

"Come along, Martha." Her husband and Blakesly had moved in behind her.

"In a moment," she answered. "Brownie, meet my friend Jerry. Doesn't he look just like Uncle Albert? Except that he looks so sad. Why are you unhappy, Jerry?"

"They don't understand abstract ideas," put in Blakesly.

But Jerry surprised him. "Jerry sad," he announced in tones so doleful that Martha van Vogel did not know whether to laugh or to cry.

"Why, Jerry?" she asked gently. "Why are you so sad?"

"No work," he stated. "No sigret. No candy. No work."

"These are all old workers who have passed their usefulness," Blakesly repeated. "Idleness upsets them, but we have nothing for them to do."

"Well!" she said. "Then why don't you have them sort buttons, or something like that, such as the baby ones do?"

"They wouldn't even do that properly," Blakesly answered. "These workers are senile."

"Jerry isn't senile! You heard him talk."

"Well, perhaps not. Just a moment." He turned to the apeman, who was squatting down in order to scratch Napoleon's head with a long forefinger thrust through the fence. "You, Joe! Come here."

Blakesly felt around the worker's hairy neck and located a thin steel chain to which was attached a small metal tag. He studied it.

"You're right," he admitted. "He's not really over age, but his eyes are bad. I remember the lot—cataracts as a result of an unfortunate linked mutation." He shrugged.

"But that's no reason to let him grieve his heart out in idleness."

"Really, Mrs. van Vogel, you should not upset yourself about it. They don't stay in these pens long—only a few days at the most."

"Oh," she answered, somewhat mollified, "you have some other place to retire them to, then. Do you give them something to do there? Jerry wants to work. Don't you, Jerry?"

The neo-Chimp had been struggling to follow the conversation. He caught the last idea and grinned.

"Jerry work! Sure mike! Good worker." He flexed his fingers, then made fists, displaying fully opposed thumbs.

Mr. Blakesly seemed somewhat nonplussed. "Really, Mrs. van Vogel, there is no need. You see—" He stopped.

Van Vogel had been listening irritably. His wife's enthusiasms annoyed him, unless they were also his own. Furthermore he was beginning to blame Blakesly for his own recent extravagance and had a premonition that his wife would find some way to make him pay, very sweetly, for his indulgence.

Being annoyed with both of them, he chucked in the perfect wrong remark. "Don't be silly, Martha. They don't retire them, they liquidate them."

IT TOOK a little time for the idea to soak in, but when it did she was furious. "Why—why—I never heard of such a thing! You ought to be ashamed. You—you would shoot your own grandmother!"

"Mrs. van Vogel—please!"

"Don't 'Mrs. van Vogel' me! It's got to stop—do you hear me?" She looked around at the death pens, at the milling hundreds of old workers therein. "It's horrible. You work them until they can't work anymore, then you take away their little comforts, and you dispose of them. I wonder you don't eat them!"

"They do," her husband said brutally. "Dog food."

"What! Well, we'll put a stop to that!"

"Mrs. van Vogel," Blakesly pleaded. "Let me explain."

"Humph! Go ahead. It had better be good."

"Well, it's like this—" His eye fell on Jerry, standing with worried expression at the fence. "Scram, Joe!" Jerry shuffled away.

"Wait, Jerry!" Mrs. van Vogel called out. Jerry paused uncertainly. "Tell him to come back," she ordered Blakesly.

The manager bit his lip, then called out, "Come back here."

He was beginning definitely to dislike Mrs. van Vogel, despite his automatic tendency to genuflect in the presence of a high credit rating. To

be told how to run his own business—well, now, indeed!

"Mrs. van Vogel, I admire your humanitarian spirit but you don't understand the situation. We understand our workers and do what is best for them. They die painlessly before their disabilities can trouble them. They live happy lives, happier than yours or mine. We trim off the bad part of their lives, nothing more. And don't forget, these poor beasts would never have been born had we not arranged it."

She shook her head. "Fiddlesticks! You'll be quoting the Bible at me next. There will be no more of it, Mr. Blakesly. I shall hold you personally responsible."

Blakesly looked bleak. "My responsibilities are to the directors."

"You think so?" She opened her purse and snatched out her telephone. So great was her agitation that she did not bother to call through, but signalled the local relay operator instead. "Phoenix? Get me Great New York, Murray Hill 9Q-4004, Mr. Haskell. Priority-star subscriber 777. Make it quick." She stood there, tapping her foot and glaring, until her business manager answered. "Haskell? This is Martha van Vogel. How much Workers, Incorporated, common do I own? No, no, never mind that—what percent?—So? Well, it's not enough. I want 51% by tomorrow morning . . . all right, get proxies for the rest but get it . . . I didn't ask you what it would cost: I said to get it. Get busy." She disconnected abruptly and turned to her husband. "We're leaving, Brownie, and we are taking Jerry with us. Mr. Blakesly, will you kindly have him taken out of that pen? Give him a check for the amount, Brownie."

"Now, Martha—"

"My mind is made up, Brownie."

Mr. Blakesly cleared his throat. It was going to be pleasant to thwart this woman.

"The workers are never sold. I'm

sorry. It's a matter of policy."

"Very well then, I'll take a permanent lease."

"This worker has been removed from the labor market. He is not for lease."

"Am I going to have more trouble with you?"

"If you please, Madame! This worker is not available under any terms—but, as a courtesy to you, I am willing to transfer to you indentures for him, gratis. I want you to know that the policies of this firm are formed from a very real concern for the welfare of our charges as well as from the standpoint of good business practice. We therefore reserve the right to inspect at any time to assure ourselves that you are taking proper care of this worker."

There, he told himself savagely, that will stop her clock!

"Of course, Thank you, Mr. Blakesly. You are most gracious."

III

THE trip back to Great New York was not jolly. Napoleon hated it and let it be known. Jerry was patient but airsick. By the time they grounded, the van Vogels were not on speaking terms.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. van Vogel," Haskell said. "The shares were simply not available. We should have had proxy on the O'Toole block, but someone tied them up an hour before I reached them."

"Blakesly."

"Undoubtedly. You should not have tipped him off; you gave him time to warn his employers."

"Don't waste time telling me what mistakes I made yesterday. What are you going to do today?"

"My dear Mrs. van Vogel, what can I do?"

"Don't talk nonsense. You are supposed to be smarter than I am; that's why I pay you to do my think-

ing for me. If you're not capable—"

Mr. Haskell looked helpless.

His principal struck a cigarette so hard she broke it.

"Why isn't Wycoff here?"

"Really, Mrs. van Vogel, there are no special legal aspects. You want the stock; we can't buy it nor bind it. Therefore—"

"I pay Wycoff to know the legal angles. Get him."

Wycoff was leaving his office; Haskell caught him on a chase-me circuit.

"Alan," Haskell called out. "Come to my office, will you? Oscar Haskell."

"Sorry. How about four o'clock?"

"Alan, I want you—now!" cut in the client's voice. "This is Martha van Vogel."

The little man shrugged helplessly. "Right away," he agreed. That woman—why hadn't he retired on his one hundred and twenty-fifth birthday, as his wife had urged him?

Then minutes later he was listening to Haskell's explanations and his client's interruptions. When they had finished he spread his hands.

"What do you expect, Mrs. van Vogel? These workers are chattels. You have not been able to buy the property rights involved; you are stopped. But I don't see what you are worked up about. They gave you the worker whose life you wanted preserved."

She spoke forcefully under her breath, before she answered him.

"That's not important. What is one worker among millions? I want to stop this killing, all of it."

Wycoff shook his head. "If you were able to prove that their methods of disposing of these beasts were inhumane, or that they were negligent of their physical welfare before destroying them, or that the destruction was wanton—"

"Wanton? It certainly is!"

"Probably not in a legal sense, my dear lady. There was a case, Julius

Hartman et al. vs. Hartman Estate, 1972, I believe, in which a permanent injunction was granted against carrying out a term of the will which called for the destruction of a valuable collection of Persian cats. But in order to use that theory you would have to show that these creatures, when superannuated, are nevertheless more valuable alive than dead. You cannot compel a person to maintain chattels at a loss."

"See here, Alan, I didn't get you over here to tell me how this can't be done. If what I want isn't legal, then get a law passed."

WYCOFF looked at Haskell, who looked embarrassed and answered: "Well, the fact of the matter is, Mrs. van Vogel, that we have agreed with the other members of the Commonwealth Association not to subsidize any legislation during the incumbency of the present administration."

"How ridiculous! Why?"

"The Legislative Guild has brought out a new fair-practices code which we consider quite unfair, a sliding scale which penalizes the well-to-do—all very nice sounding, with special provisions for nominal fees for veterans' private bills and such things—but in fact the code is confiscatory. Even the Briggs Foundation can hardly afford to take a proper interest in public affairs under this so-called code."

"Humph! A fine day when legislators join unions—they are professional men. Bribes should be competitive. Get an injunction!"

"Mrs. van Vogel," protested Wycoff, "how can you expect me to get an injunction against an organization which has no legal existence? In a legal sense, there is no Legislative Guild, just as the practice of assisting legislation by subsidy has itself no legal existence."

"And babies come under cabbage

leaves. Quit stalling me, gentlemen. What are you going to do?"

Wycoff spoke when he saw that Haskell did not intend to. "Mrs. van Vogel, I think we should retain a special Shyster."

"I don't employ Shysters, ever—I don't understand the way they think. I am a simple housewife, Alan."

Mr. Wycoff flinched at her self-designation while noting that he must not let her find out that the salary of his own staff Shyster was charged to her payroll. As convention required, he maintained the front of a simple, barefoot solicitor, but he had found out long ago that Martha van Vogel's problems required an occasional dose of the more exotic branch of the law.

"The man I have in mind is a creative artist," he insisted. "It is no more necessary to understand him than it is to understand the composer in order to appreciate a symphony. I do recommend that you talk with him, at least."

"Oh, very well! Get him up here."

"Here? My dear lady." Haskell was shocked at the suggestion; Wycoff looked amazed. "It would not only cause any action you bring to be thrown out of court if it were known that you had consulted this man, but it would prejudice any Briggs enterprise for years."

Mrs. van Vogel shrugged. "You men. I never will understand the way you think. Why shouldn't one consult a Shyster as openly as one consults an Astrologer?"

JAMES RODERICK MCCOY was not a large man, but he seemed large. He managed to dominate even so large a room as Mrs. van Vogel's spacious saloh. His card read:

J. R. MCCOY

"The Real McCoy"

Licensed Shyster-Fixing, Special

Contacts, Angles

All Work Guaranteed

Telephone Skyline 9-8M4554

Ask for Mac

The number given was the pool room of the notorious Three Planets Club. He wasted no time on offices and kept his files in his head—the only safe place for them.

He was sitting on the floor, attempting to teach Jerry to shoot craps, while Mrs. van Vogel explained her problems.

"What do you think, Mr. McCoy? Could we approach it through the SPCA? My public relations staff could give it a build up."

McCoy got to his feet. "Jerry's eyes aren't so bad; he caught me trying to palm box cars off on him as a natural. No," he continued, "the SPCA, angle is no good. It's what 'Workers' will expect. They'll be ready to prove that the anthropoids actually enjoy being killed off."

Jerry rattled the dice hopefully. "That's all, Jerry—scram."

"Okay, Boss." The ape-man got to his feet and went to the big stereo which filled a corner of the room. Napoleon ambled after him and switched it on. Jerry punched a selector button and got a blues singer. Napoleon immediately punched another, then another and another until he got a loud but popular band. He stood there, beating out the rhythm with his trunk.

Jerry looked pained and switched it back to his blues singer. Napoleon stubbornly reached out with his prehensile nose and switched it off. Jerry used a swear word.

"Boys!" called out Mrs. van Vogel. "Quit squabbling. Jerry, let Nappie play what he wants to. You can play the stereo when Nappy has to take his nap."

"Okay, Missy Boss."

McCoy was interested. "Jerry likes music?"

"Like it? He loves it. He's been learning to sing."

"Huh? This I gotta hear."

"Certainly. Nappie—turn off the stereo." The elephant complied but managed to look put upon. "Now

Jerry—"Jingle Bells." She led him in it:

"Jingle bells, jingle bells, jingle all the day—," and he followed,

"Jinger bez, jinger bez, jinger aw-rah day;

Oh, wot fun tis to ride in one-hoss open sway."

He was flat, he was terrible. He looked ridiculous, patting out the time with one splay foot. But it was singing.

"Say, that's fast!" McCoy commented. "Too bad Nappie can't talk—we'd have a duet."

Jerry looked puzzled. "Nappie talk good," he stated. He bent over the elephant and spoke to him. Napoleon grunted and moaned back at him. "See, Boss?" Jerry said triumphantly.

"What did he say?"

"He say, 'Can Nappie pray stereo now?'"

"Very well, Jerry," Mrs. van Vogel interceded. The ape-man spoke to his chum in whispers. Napoleon squealed and did not turn on the stereo.

"Jerry!" said his mistress. "I said nothing of the sort; he does not have to play your blues singer. Come away, Jerry. Nappie—play what you want to."

"You mean he tried to cheat?" McCoy inquired with interest.

"He certainly did."

"Hmm—Jerry's got the makings of a real citizen. Shave him and put shoes on him and he'd get by all right in the precinct I grew up in." He stared at the anthropoid. Jerry stared back, puzzled but patient.

Mrs. van Vogel had thrown away the dirty canvas kilt which was both his badge of servitude and a concession to propriety and had replaced it with a kilt in the bright Cameron war plaid, complete to sporran, and topped off with a Glengarry.

"Do you suppose he could learn to play the bagpipes?" McCoy asked. "I'm beginning to get an angle."

"Why, I don't know. What's your idea?"

McCoy squatted down cross-legged and began practicing rolls with his dice.

"Never mind," he answered when it suited him, "That angle's no good. But we're getting there." He rolled four naturals, one after the other. "You say Jerry still belongs to the Corporation?"

"In a titular sense, yes. I doubt if they will ever try to repossess him."

"I wish they would try." He scooped up the dice and stood up. "It's in the bag, sis. Forget it. I'll want to talk to your publicity man but you can quit worrying about it."

IV

OF COURSE Mrs. van Vogel should have knocked before entering her husband's room—but then she would not have overheard what he was saying, nor to whom.

"That's right," she heard him say, "we haven't any further need for him. Take him away, the sooner the better. Just be sure the men you send have a signed order directing us to turn him over."

She was not apprehensive, as she did not understand the conversation, but merely curious. She looked over her husband's shoulder at the video screen.

There she saw Blakesly's face. His voice was saying, "Very well, Mr. van Vogel, the anthropoid will be picked up tomorrow."

She strode up to the screen. "Just a minute, Mr. Blakesly"—then, to her husband, "Brownie, what in the world do you think you are doing?"

The expression she surprised on his face was not one he had ever let her see before.

"Why don't you knock?"

"Maybe it's a good thing I didn't. Brownie, did I hear you right? Were you telling Mr. Blakesly to pick up Jerry?" She turned to the screen. "Was that it, Mr. Blakesly?"

"That is correct, Mrs. van Vogel, and I must say I find this confusion most—"

"Stow it." She turned back. "Brownie, what have you got to say for yourself?"

"Martha, you are being preposterous. Between that elephant and that ape this place is a zoo. I actually caught your precious Jerry smoking my special cigars today—not to mention the fact that both of them play the stereo all day long until a man can't get a moment's peace. I certainly don't have to stand for such things in my own house."

"Whose house, Brownie?"

"That's beside the point. I will not stand for—"

"Never mind." She turned to the screen. "My husband seems to have lost his taste for exotic animals. Mr. Blakesly. Cancel the order for a pegasus."

"Martha!"

"Sauce for the goose, Brownie. I'll pay for your whims, but not for your tantrums. The contract is cancelled, Mr. Blakesly. Mr. Haskell will arrange the details."

Blakesly shrugged. "Your capricious behavior will cost you, of course. The penalties—"

"I said Mr. Haskell would arrange the details. One more thing, Mister Manager Blakesly—have you done as I told you?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. Are those poor creatures still alive and well?"

"That is not your business." He had, in fact, suspended the killings; the directors had not wanted to take any chances until they saw what the Briggs trust could manage, but Blakesly would not give her the satisfaction of knowing that.

She looked at him as if he were a skipped dividend. "It's not, eh? Well, bear this in mind, you cold-blooded little pigsqueak; I'm holding you personally responsible. If just one of them dies from *anything*, I'll have your skin for a rug." She flipped off the connection and turned to her husband. "Brownie—"

"It's useless to say anything," he cut in, in the cold voice he normally used to bring her to heel. "I shall be at the club. Goodbye!"

"That's just what I was going to suggest."

"What?"

"I'll have your clothes sent over. Do you have anything else in this house?"

He stared at her. "Don't talk like a fool, Martha."

"I'm not talking like a fool." She looked him up and down. "My, but you are handsome, Brownie. I guess I was a fool to think I could buy a big hunk of man with a checkbook. I guess a girl gets them free, or she doesn't get them at all. Thanks for the lesson." She turned and slammed out of the room and into her own suite.

FIVE minutes later, make-up repaired and nerves steadied by a few whiffs of Fly-Right, she called the pool room of the Three Planets Club. McCoy came to the screen carrying a cue.

"Oh, it's you, sugar puss. Well, snap it up—I've got four bits on this game."

"This is business."

"Okay, okay—spill it."

She told him the essentials. "I'm sorry about cancelling the flying horse contract, Mr. McCoy. I hope it won't make your job any harder. I'm afraid I lost my temper."

"Fine. Go lose it again."

"Huh?"

"You're barrelling down the groove, kid. Call Blakesly up again. Bawl him out. Tell him to keep his

bailiffs away from you, or you'll stuff 'em and use them for hat racks. Dare him to take Jerry away from you."

"I don't understand you."

"You don't have to, girlie. Remember this: You can't have a bull fight until you get the bull mad enough to fight. Have Wycoff get a temporary injunction restraining Workers, Incorporated, from reclaiming Jerry. Have your boss press agent give me a buzz. Then you call in the newsboys and tell them what you think of Blakesly. Make it nasty. Tell them you intend to put a stop to this wholesale murder if it takes every cent you've got."

"Well—all right. Will you come to see me before I talk to them?"

"Nope—gotta get back to my game. Tomorrow, maybe. Don't fret about having cancelled that silly winged-horse deal. I always did think your old man was weak in the head, and it's saved you a nice piece of change. You'll need it when I send in my bill. Boy, am I going to clip you! Bye now."

The bright letters trailed around the sides of the Times Building: "World's Richest Woman Puts Up Fight For Ape-man." The giant video screen above showed a transcribe of Jerry, in his ridiculous Highland chief outfit.

A small army of private police surrounded the Briggs town house, while Mrs. van Vogel informed anyone who would listen, including several news services, that she would defend Jerry personally and to the death.

The public relations office of Workers, Incorporated, denied any intention of seizing Jerry; the denial got nowhere.

In the meantime technicians installed extra audio and video circuits in the largest courtroom in town, for one Jerry (no surname), described as a legal, permanent resident of these United States, had asked for a permanent injunction against the

corporate person "Workers," its officers, employees, successors, or assignees, forbidding it to do him any physical harm and in particular forbidding it to kill him.

Through his attorney, the honorable and distinguished and stuffily respectable Augustus Pomfrey, Jerry brought the action *in his own name*.

Martha van Vogel sat in the courtroom as a spectator only. She was surrounded by secretaries, guards, maid, publicity men and "yes" men. She had one television camera trained on her alone. She was nervous. McCoy had insisted on briefing Pomfrey through Wycoff, to keep Pomfrey from knowing that he was being helped by a Shyster. She had her own opinion of Pomfrey.

The McCoy had insisted that Jerry not wear his beautiful new kilt, but had dressed him in faded dungaree trousers and jacket. It seemed poor theater to her.

Jerry himself worried her. He seemed confused by the lights and the noise and the crowd, about to go to pieces.

And McCoy had refused to go to the trial with her. He had told her that it was quite impossible, that his mere presence would alienate the court, and Wycoff had backed him up. Men! Their minds were devious—they seemed to like twisted ways of doing things. It confirmed her opinion that men should not be allowed to vote.

BUT she felt lost without the immediate presence of McCoy's breezy self-confidence. Away from him, she wondered why she had ever trusted such an important matter to an irresponsible, jumping jack, bird-brained clown like McCoy. She chewed her nails and wished he were present.

The panel of attorneys appearing for Workers, Incorporated, began by moving that the action be dismissed

without trial, on the theory that Jerry was a chattel of the corporation, an integral part of it, and no more able to sue than the thumb can sue the brain.

The Honorable Augustus Pomfrey looked every inch the statesman as he bowed to the Court and to his opponents.

"It is indeed strange," he began, "to hear the second-hand voice of a legal fiction, a soulless, imaginary quantity called a corporate 'person,' argue that a flesh-and-blood creature, a being of hopes and longings and passions, has no legal existence. I see here beside me my poor cousin Jerry." He patted Jerry on the shoulder; the ape-man, needing reassurance, slid a hand into his. It went over well.

"But when I look for this abstract fancy 'Workers,' what do I find? Nothing—some words on paper, some signed bits of foolscap—"

"If the Court please, a question," put in the opposition chief attorney, "does the learned counsel contend that a limited liability stock company cannot own property?"

"Will the counsel reply?" directed the judge.

"Thank you. My esteemed colleague has set up a straw man; I contended only that the question as to whether Jerry is a chattel of Workers, Incorporated, is immaterial, non-essential, irrelevant. I am a part of the incorporate city of Great New York. Does that deny me my civil rights as a person of flesh and blood? In fact it does not even rob me of my rights to sue that civic corporation of which I am a part, if, in my opinion, I am wronged by it.

"We are met today in the mellow light of equity, rather than in the cold and narrow confines of law. It seems a fit time to dwell on the strange absurdities we live by, where—under a nonentity of paper and legal fiction we could deny the exist-

ence of this, our poor cousin. I ask that the learned attorneys for the corporation stipulate that Jerry does, in fact, exist, and let us get on with the action."

They huddled; the answer was "No."

"Very well. My client asks to be examined in order that the Court may determine his status and being."

"Objection! This anthropoid cannot be examined; he is a mere part and chattel of the respondent."

"That is what we are about to determine," the Court answered dryly. "Objection overruled."

"Go sit in that chair, Jerry."

"Objection! This beast cannot take an oath—it is beyond his comprehension."

"What have you to say to that, Counsel?"

"If it please the Court," answered Pomfrey, "the simplest thing to do is to put him in the chair and find out."

"Let him take the stand. The clerk will administer the oath." Martha van Vogel gripped the arms of her chair; McCoy had spent a full week training him for this. Would the poor thing blow up without McCoy to guide him?

The clerk droned through the oath; Jerry looked puzzled but patient.

"Your honor," said Pomfrey, "when young children must give testimony, it is customary to permit a little leeway in the wording, to fit their mental attainments. May I be permitted?" He walked up to Jerry.

"Jerry, my boy, are you a good worker?"

"Sure mike! Jerry good worker!"

"Maybe bad worker, huh? Lazy. Hide from strawboss."

"No no, no, Jerry good worker. Dig. Weed. Not dig up vegetaber. Dig up weed. Work hard."

"You will see," Pomfrey addressed the Court, "that my client

has very definite ideas of what is true and what is false. Now let us attempt to find out whether or not he has moral values which require him to tell the truth. Jerry—"

"Yps, Boss."

Pomfrey spread his hand in front of the anthropoid's face. "How many fingers do you see?"

Jerry reached out and ticked them off. "One-two-three-four, uh-five."

"Six fingers, Jerry."

"Five, Boss."

"Six fingers, Jerry. I give you cigarette. Six."

"Five, Boss. Jerry not cheat."

Pomfrey spread his hands. "Will the Court accept him?"

V

THE Court did. Martha van Vogel sighed. Jerry could not count very well and she had been afraid that he would forget his lines and accept the bribe. But he had been promised all the cigarettes he wanted and chocolate as well if he would remember to insist that five was five.

"I suggest," Pomfrey went on, "that the matter has been established. Jerry is an entity; if he can be accepted as a witness, then surely he may have his day in court. Even a dog may have his day in court. Will my esteemed colleagues stipulate?"

Workers, Incorporated, through its battery of lawyers, agreed—just in time, for the judge was beginning to cloud up. He had been much impressed by the little performance.

The tide was with him; Pomfrey used it. "If it please the Court and if the counsels for the respondent will permit, we can shorten these proceedings. I will state the theory under which relief is sought and then; by a few questions, it may be settled one way or another. I ask

that it be stipulated that it was the intention of Workers, Incorporated, through its servants, to take the life of my client."

Stipulation was refused.

"So? Then I ask that the Court take judicial notice of the well known fact that these anthropoid workers are destroyed when they no longer show a profit; thereafter I will call witnesses, starting with Horace Blakesly, to show that Jerry was and presumably is under such sentence of death."

Another hurried huddle resulted in the stipulation that Jerry had, indeed, been scheduled for euthanasia.

"Then," said Pomfrey, "I will state my theory. Jerry is not an animal, but a man. It is not legal to kill—it is murder."

First there was silence, then the crowd gasped. People had grown used to animals that talked and worked, but they were no more prepared to think of them as persons, humans, *men*, than were the haughty Roman citizens prepared to concede human feelings to their barbarian slaves.

Pomfrey let them have it while they were still groggy. "What is a man? A collection of living cells and tissues? A legal fiction, like this corporate 'person' that would take poor Jerry's life? No, a man is none of these things. A man is a collection of hopes and fears, of human longings, of aspirations greater than himself—more than the clay from which he came; less than the Creator which lifted him up from the clay. Jerry has been taken from his jungle and made something more than the poor creatures who were his ancestors, even as you and I. We ask that this Court recognize his manhood."

The opposing attorneys saw that the Court was moved; they drove in fast. An anthropoid, they contended, could not be a man because he lacked human shape and human intelligence. Pomfrey called his first wit-

ness—Master B'na Kreeth.

The Martian's normal bad temper had not been improved by being forced to wait around for three days in a travel tank, to say nothing of the indignity of having to interrupt his researches to take part in the childish pow-wows of terrestrials.

There was further delay to irritate him while Pomfrey forced the corporation attorneys to accept B'na as an expert witness. They wanted to refuse but could not—he was their own Director of Research. He also held voting control of all Martian-held Workers' stock, a fact unmentioned but hampering.

More delay while an interpreter was brought in to help administer the oath—B'na Kreeth, self-centered as all Martians, had never bothered to learn English.

He twittered and chirped in answer to the demand that he tell the truth, the whole truth, and so forth; the interpreter looked pained.

"He says he can't do it," he informed the judge.

Pomfrey asked for exact translation. The interpreter looked uneasily at the judge.

"He says that if he told the whole truth you fools—not 'fools' exactly; it's a Martian word meaning a sort of headless worm—would not understand it."

BRIEFLY the court discussed the idea of contempt. When the Martian understood that he was about to be forced to remain in a travel tank for thirty days he came off his high horse and agreed to tell the truth as adequately as was possible. He was accepted as a witness.

"Are you a man?" demanded Pomfrey.

"Under your laws and by your standards I am a man."

"By what theory? Your body is unlike ours; you cannot even live in our air. You do not speak our language; your ideas are alien to us.

How can you be a man?"

The Martian answered carefully: "*I quote from the Terra-Martian Treaty, which you must accept as supreme law. 'All members of the Great Race, while sojourning on the Third Planet, shall have all the rights and prerogatives of the native dominant race of the Second Planet.' This clause has been interpreted by the Bi-Planet Tribunal to mean that members of the Great Race are 'men,' whatever that may be.*"

"Why do you refer to your sort as the 'Great Race'?"

"Because of our superior intelligence."

"Superior to men?"

"We are men."

"Superior to the intelligence of earth men?"

"That is self-evident."

"Just as we are superior in intelligence to this poor creature, Jerry."

"That is not self-evident."

"Finished with the witness," announced Pomfrey.

The opposition counsels should have left had-enough alone; instead they tried to get B'na Kreeth to define the difference in intelligence between humans and worker-anthropoids. Master B'na explained meticulously that cultural differences masked the intrinsic differences, if any, and that, in any case, both anthropoids and men made so little use of their respective potential intelligences that it was really too early to tell which race would turn out to be the superior race in the Third Planet.

He had just begun to discuss how a truly superior race could be bred by combining the best features of anthropoids and men when he was hastily asked to "stand down."

"May it please the Court," said Pomfrey, "we have not advanced the theory; we have merely disposed of respondent's contention that a particular shape and a particular degree of intelligence are necessary to man-

hood. I now ask that the petitioner be recalled to the stand that the Court may determine whether he is, in truth, human."

"If the learned Court please—" The battery of lawyers had been in a huddle ever since B'na Kreeth's travel tank had been removed from the room; the chief counsel now spoke.

"The object of the petition appears to be to protect the life of this chattel. There is no need to draw out these proceedings; respondent stipulates that this chattel will be allowed to die a natural death in the hands of its present custodian and moves that the action be dismissed."

"What do you say to that?" the Court asked Pomfrey.

Pomfrey visibly gathered his toga about him. "We ask not for cold charity from this corporation, but for the justice of the Court. We ask that Jerry's humanity be established as a matter of law. Not for him to vote, nor to hold property, nor to be relieved of special police regulations appropriate to his group—but we do ask that he be adjudged at least as human as that aquarium monstrosity just removed from this courtroom!"

The judge turned to Jerry. "Is that what you want, Jerry?"

Jerry looked uneasily at Pomfrey, then said, "Okay, Boss."

"Come up to the chair."

"One moment—" The opposition chief counsel seemed flurried. "I ask

the Court to consider that a ruling in this matter may affect a long established commercial practice necessary to the economic life of—"

"Objection!" Pomfrey was on his feet, bristling. "Never have I heard a more outrageous attempt to prejudice a decision. My esteemed colleague might as well ask the Court to decide a murder case from political considerations. I protest—"

"Never mind," said the Court. "The suggestion will be ignored. Proceed with your witness."

Pomfrey bowed. "We are exploring the meaning of this strange thing called 'manhood.' We have seen that it is not a matter of shape, nor race, nor planet of birth, nor of acuteness of mind. Truly, it cannot be defined, yet it may be experienced. It can reach from heart to heart, from spirit to spirit." He turned to Jerry. "Jerry—will you sing your new song for the judge?"

"Sure, Boss." Jerry looked uneasily up at the whirring cameras, the mikes, and the ikes, then cleared his throat:

"Way down upon de Suwanee River

Far, far away;
Dere's where my heart is turning
ebber—"

The applause scared him out of his wits; the banging of the gavel frightened him still more—but it mattered not; the issue was no longer in doubt.

Jerry was a man.

Edmond Hamilton—Murray Leinster—L. Sprague de Camp

and other headliners in the January

FANTASTIC STORY MAGAZINE

A BIG QUARTER'S WORTH AT ALL NEWSSTANDS!

THE IRRITATED PEOPLE

By RAY BRADBURY

Every weapon of war was outlawed—except vanity!

CHARLES CROSSLEY, President of American Jet-Propelled Ships, felt himself spreadeagled in his favorite living room chair. The voice on the television moaned. Europe. Crossley twitched. Secret atomic factories. Crossley jerked. Semi-dictatorships. Crossley sweated. Political pressures. War. Crossley writhed.

His wife shut the television off indignantly. "Nonsense!" She stared at her limp husband. "Tri-Union hasn't any weapons, we haven't any, neither has Russia, Britain or anyone else. That was all settled and forbidden ages ago. When was it? 1960?"

Crossley stroked his receding hairline, sighing. "They're making atom bombs in secret," he said. He littered the rug with cigar ash.

"Stop that!" cried his wife. "My nice rug!"

"The rug, oh, the confounded rug," he said, and muttered away, closing his eyes for a long minute. Then he opened one eye. He looked at his wife. He looked at the rug, the cigar in his hand, the fallen ashes.

"The rug?" He shut his eyes again. Five minutes later he leaped up with an explosion of sound. "The rug! I've got it! I've got it!" He seized his wife, kissed her. "You are

brilliant! I love you! That's it, that is it!"

He rushed madly off in the general direction of Europe!

Thus began the Tri-Union-American war of the year 1989.

The small jet-propelled ship crossed the Atlantic in fiery gusts. In it was Charles Crossley, a man with an idea. Behind it three thousand other ships tore along, putting space behind. They were his ships. They belonged to his company. He employed the men. This was his own private war.

"Ha!" Mr. Crossley laughed quite obviously.

The radio cut in on him. "Crossley?"

Crossley answered. "Speaking."
"This is the President, Crossley." The voice was sharp, and it fairly heated the interior of the ship. "Turn back, in the name of common sense. What are you up to! I'll seize your company!"

"This can wait, Mr. President. We've been sweating it out for months. The Tri-Union won't admit it's setting up a fascistic skeleton in Europe, we can't find any proof they are, but there are rumors. We've got to get it out in the open. We can't wait. I'm sorry I have to act alone. Bombardiers?"

"Ready!" Three thousand voices.



Katrina was losing her beautiful hair

"Crossley!" shouted the President, far away.

"Here comes Vienna!" Crossley jerked his hand down. "Bombloads, release!"

"Release!" Three thousand voices.

"Crossley!" The President.

"Bang!" said Crossley.

Pink confetti tumbled down through the clear cool summer air. Tons and tons of pink, whirling confetti by the bombload, three thousand cargoes of very pink, very fine confetti!

"And to think," mused Crossley happily, as he turned his ship homeward, "to think the entire idea came from spilling ashes on the rug! Hi-ho!"

The President of the United States shook his fist.

"You bombed them!"

"Crossley yawned. "There is no law against dropping waste paper," he said, quietly.

"You attacked the people of the Tri-Union states!"

"No one injured," said Crossley, calmly. "No explosion, no bruises, no fatalities. Did anybody even get a piece of confetti in his eye? The answer is no. A two letter word."

Crossley lit a cigarette. "Fifty thousand housefraus and one hundred thousand children swept sidewalks. Men flooded employment offices in Vienna for street sweeper jobs. But, ah, that clever devilish confetti! It was electrically and chemically impregnated. It vanished when touched by human hands. It reappeared when humans withdrew from the immediate vicinity. Brooms helped little. When disturbed the confetti had a curious habit of jumping like tiddle-de-winks or jumping beans. Sensitive little things. I dare say it'll be some weeks before Vienna is clean. That is what I have done to the Tri-Union. The World Organization forbids an attack. Was this an attack, sir? Confetti on the wind? Eh?"

"The World Organization forbids war!" cried the President.

"This is not war." Crossley leaned forward, tapped the desk earnestly. "Suppose we dropped confetti every day, causing the Tri-Union population to pluck and curry their lawns 365 days a year? And there are other things we can do, Mr. President. Little, irritating things. Imagine it, Mr. President, will you?"

The President imagined it for quite awhile. Then, slowly, he began to smile.

IT WAS a sweet day, a morning in the Tri-Union state of Bruegher. The sky was blue, the clouds were nicely white. And upon the rolling green hills a picnic was spread, with thousands of tossed paper napkins, hundreds of bread heels, crusts, can openers, sardine tins, dropped eggs and wadded cardboard cartons. The picnic, like a river of several thousand parts, engulfed the park-like hills. One small boy running through the dells paused to leave his semi-digested lunch.

Laughter. Wine bottles gurgling! Songs!

The President of the United States and Mr. Crossley clinked glasses, heading the picnic, drank gustily, refilled, drank again. Others yelled, screamed in delight, played tag, threw away bottles!

And on twenty thousand other Tri-Union hills twenty thousand other small family ships landed. Twenty thousand more picnic riots began. Sixty thousand napkins, well wadded, were dropped from wiped lips! One hundred thousand shattered egg shells were spilled! Sixty thousand shiny soup cans were left gleaming in the sun. Three hundred million ants rushed out to welcome them. And the thirty million people of Bruegher glared at the invasion, knowing not what to do. What was the world coming to?

At nightfall, the last little boy had emptied himself of his brackish contents, the last little girl plucked hawling from a poison ivy nest, the last sardine dispatched; the last beer bottle left a foamy vacuum.

Flying away into the night, the American invaders sent back their war cry which sounded remarkably like, and probably was, a belch.

General Krauss, personal representative of Bruegher, the new semi-dictator of Europe, shouted out of the televisor:

"Mr. President, you, you were seen, by reliable witnesses, to peel an

egg and, bit by bit, throw the shell under a one hundred year old linden tree!"

Crossley and the President stood together in the White House inner sanctum. The President spoke:

"Krauss, the peace laws specify no nation may manufacture weapons for killing, wounding or destruction of another's national populace or property. We are helpless to attack you, therefore. All the while, you, in secret, make weapons—"

"You can't prove that!"

"—make weapons," said the President, grimly. "So, in last recourse, we use weapons which are not weapons at all. We have destroyed nothing and no one."

"Ah-hah!" Krauss' eyes snapped on the visor. His face vanished. A new scene replaced it, showing a green meadow. Krauss' voice crackled behind it, in comment. "Property damage to Greater Bruegher! Listen! Rough estimate! Sixty-five thousand ants, large and small, both black and red, biting and non-biting, were trodden on at your picnic!"

The scene dissolved to yet another.

"Hark! Ten million grass-blades. Approximately. Ten million trampled and crushed. Two thousand pretty flowers—picked!"

"That was an error," apologized Crossley. "The children got out of hand."

"Two thousand flowers," repeated Krauss savagely. "Picked!"

Krauss took time to get hold of himself. He cleared his throat and continued.

"Approximately thirty billion atomic particles of wood brushed off Great Bruegher sycamores, oaks, elms and lindens by adults playing tree tag—AND—sixty million particles scraped from Greater Bruegher fences by young men escaping angered Greater Bruegher bulls. AND! And—" he thundered. The scene dissolved once more, and a

most interesting view was revealed. "And—sixteen thousand cubic feet of A-1, first class forest moss crushed, rolled upon and otherwise malpracticed by young lovers idling in the thickets! There you are! The proof! The proof! This is war!"

THE first Tri-Union airships flew over New York a week later. From them, on parachutes, little yellow boxes floated.

Crossley, in his garden resting, preparing new methods of attack on the enemy, was astonished as one of the devices hovered by the red brick garden wall.

"A bomb!" he cried, and leaped into the house, sorry he had started this infernal war.

Edith, his wife, peered from the rear window.

"Oh, come back," she said. "It's only a radio."

They listened. Music. Blues music. "From back in the Mad Forties, when I wore pigtails," said Edith.

"Hm," said Crossley.

The music, if such it could be called, concerned a lady afflicted with "—I got those mad about him, glad about him, but I get so sad about him bah-looze!"

"Interesting," said Crossley.

"Yes," she said.

The song ended. They waited.

The song began again.

"Is that all it plays?" said Edith.

"I don't see any dials to change the record with."

"Oh, oh," said Crossley and shut his eyes. "I think I begin to see the light—"

The song ended and started a third time.

"That's what I expected," said Crossley. "Here, give me a hand."

The song flowed into its fourth, fifth and sixth renditions as they poked at the dangling machine. It dodged—like a humming-bird. "Radar-sensitives," gasped Crossley, giving up. "Oh, *pui!*"

Edith covered her ears with her hands. "Oh, Charles," she said.

They went in the house and shut the door tight and shut the windows tighter. Nevertheless, the music penetrated.

After dinner, Crossley looked at Edith and said:

"What do you make of it?"

She counted on her fingers. "This next time will be the one hundred and thirteenth repeat," she said.

"That's what I counted," said he, handing her wads of cotton.

He worked feverishly that evening. He made plans for war using confetti, toothpaste tubes that refused to function, a chemical that dulled razors with the first scrape, and—mum, let me see . . .

His young son, age twelve, was doing his homework in the next room.

"Oblivious to that awful music," said Crossley in admiration. "Kids are marvels, can concentrate anywhere." He crept up on his son, looked over his shoulder.

The boy was writing a composition:

"Poe authored 'The Cask of Amontillado', 'Masque of the Red Death' and 'I got Those Mad About Him, Glad About Him, But I Get So Sad About Him—'"

"Blues," said Crossley. He turned. "Edith! Pack the suitcases! We're leaving home!"

HASTILY they piled into the family helicopter. As the helicopter lifted into the sky Crossley's small son said, looking down at the music box in the garden. "Two hundredth time!"

Crossley hit him.

It was useless to flee. The hovering radios were everywhere, bawling. They were in the air and on the ground and under bridges.

They could not be shot down; they dodged. And the music played on.

Edith glared at her husband who

was somewhat responsible for all this. His son tentatively eyed Crossley's shins for kicking.

Crossley called the President.

"YOU!" screamed the President. "CROSSLEY!"

"Mr. President, I can explain!"

So the war progressed. The World Organization hunched forward tensely awaiting the moment when either side got off bounds, fired a shot or committed a murder, but—

Normal civilized pursuits continued. Imports and exports flowed, foods, clothing, raw materials were exchanged.

If either country had broken relations, made guns, knives, grenades, the World Organization would have leaped in. But not a gun was fashioned, not a knife sharpened. There were no murders, wounded or bruised. The World Organization was helpless. There was no war.

Well, almost none.

"Heinrich!"

"Yes, my wife?"

"Come look at this mirror!"

Heinrich, chief deputy of the police department in a Greater Bruegher village, came slopping in his easy slippers, holding his clay pipe like a small tame bird in his hand.

Heinrich looked into a mirror that was ridiculous, like at a carnival.

"What has happened to it over night?" he wondered. "Look at me. Ha. I look like an idiot!" He chuckled. "My face stretches like rubber, shivers, is distorted. Well. The mirror is warped."

"You are warped!" shouted his wife. "Do something about it!"

"I will buy a new one. In the meantime, the one upstairs—"

"Is also warped!" she snapped. "How will I get my hat on straight, or see if my lipstick is drawn fine, or my powder neat? Clumsy idiot, hurry and fetch a new one! Go, get, rush!"

Crossley had his orders. Find a way out. Or arrange a truce. If these

next attacks by the United States did not produce results the United States must bargain for peace. Peace, yes. Peace from that abominable woman singing the abominable blues twenty times an hour, night and day. The American Public would hold the line as long as possible, said the President, but time was short and puncturing everybody's eardrums seemed a most unlikely way out. Crossley was to get in there, and pitch.

Crossley pitched. His jet plane streaked over Europe in the great offensive. Three thousand bombloads of something or other were dropped, at his order, and then the three thousand company ships curved and shot home. He lingered on, cruising the length of Europe, awaiting results.

He got them.

A LARGE, unseeable beam took hold of his ship and drew it steadily down into the dark mountains of Greater Bruegher.

"Well," said Crossley. "Adventure."

The entire capture was quiet, convivial. When he stepped from his grounded craft he was politely escorted into a city of ultra-modern buildings and avenues between the mountains, and there, in a small edifice, in a small room, he met his enemy.

Krauss sat behind a desk as Crossley entered. Crossley nodded and bowed.

"Hello, Krauss. You'll be prosecuted for kidnapping."

"You're free to go any time," snapped Krauss. "This is an interview. Sit."

The chair was shaped like a low pyramid. You could sit, but you slid in all directions. The ceiling, where Crossley was expected to sit, was very low. He had to choose between back-ache or slithering around on a pyramidal chair. He chose to slither.

Krauss reached over and pinched Crossley.

[Turn page]

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"Ouch!" said Crossley.

Krauss did it again.

"Stop that!" said Crossley.

"All right," said Krauss.

Under Crossley, the chair exploded.

GIBBERING, Crossley leaped up. He banged his head on the ceiling. He held his back end with one hand, the head with the other.

"Mr. Crossley, shall we talk of peace?"

"Yeah," said Crossley, bent over. "When you stop making secret weapons. Otherwise, more confetti, more picnics and pigs-knuckles."

"And more music in America, eh, Mr. Crossley?"

Another pinch.

"Ow! We can stand the music long enough to use our next weapon. We always did have it over you stuffed-shirts over here. You were the inventors of psychological warfare, but we gave it a few improvements."

"Can one improve over music, Mr. Crossley?"

"We'll find a way. *Ouch*. Keep that away from me!"

"I'll detail our plans, Crossley. First an oversupply of mosquitoes, in America. *Hungry ones*. Then, a chemical which causes all men's shoes to squeak with each step. Third, electrical pulses to make alarm clocks ring an hour early each morn—"

Crossley was professionally interested.

"Not bad. All within the Peace Rules. All harmless. Mmm, except those mosquitoes."

"Merely skin irritatives."

"Still, the World Org might rule against it."

"Out with the mosquitoes, then!"

"Ouch."

"Did I hurt you? Sorry. Well, let us see if we can hurt you a bit more. This paper on my desk. It is radio report of your death five minutes ago. Your plane crashed, says the report. I have only to broadcast it,

and then make sure you 'live' up to the facts contained therein. You see?"

CROSSLEY grinned. "I'm to report to the President every hour. No report, immediate World Org investigation. Do you see?"

"Your plane crashed."

"No soap. The Brindly-Connors motors never conk. And the new reactive-propellants on my ships prevent bad landings. So."

Krauss fidgeted. "We'll think of some way."

"It's time for me to phone the President; may I?"

"Here." A phone was handed him.

Crossley took the phone. Electricity shot up his arm, into his chest.

"Jeepers!" He dropped the thing.

"I'll report you!"

"You have no proof. We both play this irritation game, do we not? Go ahead. The phone."

This time, Crossley got the President:

"Crossley, you've heard the news, have you?"

"What news, sir?"

"The chewing gum, you moron, the chewing gum!"

"In the streets, sir?"

The President groaned. "In the streets, the roofs, the dog's fur, the cars, the shrubs, everywhere! Big as golf balls. And sticky!"

Krauss gloated, listening.

Crossley said, "Courage, Mr. President. Use the croquet hoops."

"Croquet hoops?" Krauss seized Crossley's arm.

"Invisible croquet hoops," Crossley smiled.

"No," Krauss triumphed. "People will stumble, be hurt, even killed by them. The World Org would stop you!"

"Oh," said Crossley. His face fell. "Look, Mr. President. About those hoops. Forget them. Proceed with Plan 40 and 45 instead."

Another phone rang. Krauss picked it up, answered it.

[Turn page]

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"Your wife, Herr Krauss."

"All right, put her on."

"I'm okay, Mr. President. Had a little engine trouble."

"What!"

"*Darling, the most terrible trouble!*"

"Katrina, I have no time. There is much to do."

"*This is important, you fool! It's horrible!*"

"Well, what is it, my liebchen? I'm busy."

"Answer me, Crossley, were you shot down?"

"Not exactly, Mr. President. They are trying to figure out a way to kill me. Haven't hit on one yet."

"Mr. Crossley, please, not so loud, I can't hear my wife talking. Yes, darling?"

"*Hans, Hans, I have dandruff!*"

"Say that again. I have so much noise here, Katrina."

"I'll call you again in an hour, Mr. President."

"*Dandruff, Hans, dandruff! A thousand, five thousand flakes on my shoulders!*"

"You call to tell me this, woman? Good-bye!"

BANG!

Crossley and Krauss hung up in unison, Krauss on his wife, Crossley on the President.

"Where were we?" said Krauss, sweating.

"You were going to kill me. Remember?"

Again the phone. Krauss swore and answered. "What?"

"*Hans, I've gained ten pounds!*"

"Why do you insist on calling to tell me these things?"

"*Mrs. Leiber, Mrs. Krenschnitz and Mrs. Schmidt, they too have gained ten pounds!*"

"Oh?" Krauss hung up, blinking. "So." He glared at Crossley. "That's what it is. All right, Crossley, we, also, can be subtle. Doctor!"

A door slid open in the wall. There stood an evil-looking rascal, sleeves rolled high, testing a hypodermic on

his own emaciated arm, enjoying it. He looked up at Crossley and said:

"Practice."

"Get him!" cried Krauss.

Everybody jumped on Crossley.

Darkness.

"How do you feel, Crossley?"

How was he supposed to feel? All right, he guessed. He lifted himself from a kind of operating table and looked at the doctor and at Krauss.

"Here, Doctor," said Krauss. "Explain to Mr. Crossley what he may expect ten years from now."

"Ten years?" said Crossley in alarm.

The doctor placed his thin fingers together, bowing. He whispered daintily.

"Ten years from now you may expect a—ah—little trouble. It will commence one year from now. Unobtrusively. Here or there a slight gastric upset, a cardiac disturbance, a minor intra-irritation of the lung sacs. Occasionally, a headache. A sallowness to the complexion, an earache, perhaps."

Crossley began to sweat. He held onto his knees.

The doctor continued, slowly, pleased with himself.

"Then, as the years pass, a small flicker, like bird wings, of the heart. A pain, as if stabbed in the groin. A twitching of the peritoneum. A hot sweating, late of nights, drenching your bedclothes. Insomnia. Night after night, cigarette after cigarette, headache after headache."

"That'll do," said Crossley bleakly.

"No, no." The doctor waved his hypodermic. "I'm not finished. Temporary blindness. I almost forgot that. Yes, temporary blindness. Fuzzy lights in your head. Voices. Paralysis of the lower limbs. Then, your heart, in one last explosion, lasting ten days, will beat itself into a bruised pulp. And you'll die, exactly—" he consulted a mental calendar, "—ten days, five months and fourteen days from today."

The silence in the room was touched only by Crossley's ragged breath-

ing. He tried to lift himself, shivered, fell back.

"Best of all, there will be no evidence of what we have done to you," said Krauss. "Certain hormones and molecular impurities were put into your body. No analysis now or after death would reveal them. Your health will simply fail. We will not be held responsible. Clever, is it not?"

FINALLY the doctor leered wickedly and announced, "You may go now. Now that we have fixed you, like a time-bomb, to die later, you are free to go. We would not want to kill you here, that would make us responsible. But, ten years from now, in another place, how can that be due to us?"

The phone. "Your wife, Herr Krauss."

"My hair is falling out!"

"Now, now, be patient, my wife."

"My skin is yellowing! Do something!"

"I will be home in an hour."

"There will be no home here, then, YOU!"

"We must go on to Victory, my sweet."

"Not on a path strewn with my golden, golden hair!"

"Yes, my wife, I will say hello to the doctor for you."

"Hans, don't you dare hang up on me. Don't you—"

Krauss sat down, fluttering his hands weakly. "My wife called me to say all is well."

"Ha," said Crossley, weakly.

Krauss reached over and pinched him.

"Ouch."

"There," said Krauss. "Speak when [Turn page]

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you're spoken to. Hear me?"

Crossley stood up, laughing. The doctor looked at him as if he were insane.

"I've got it. I'm going to commit suicide!"

"You're crazy," said Krauss.

"Ten years from now I die, so why not commit suicide here, thus bringing an investigation by the World Organization, eh, Mr. Krauss?"

"You can't do that!" said Krauss, dumbfounded. "I won't permit it."

"I'll jump off a building, perhaps. You can't hold me here for more than another hour or the Organization will come to see what ticks. And the minute you let me go, I'll jump off a building."

"No."

"Or crash my ship, purposely, on the way home. Why not? What've I to live for? And if it causes your trial, so much the better. Yes, I've decided. I'll die."

"We'll hold him here," said the doctor to Krauss.

"We can't," said Krauss.

"Release him," said the doctor.

"Don't be silly," said Krauss.

"Kill him!"

"Stillier still," gasped Krauss. "Oh, this is terrible."

"Which way," said Crossley, "to the tallest building in town?"

"You go down to the next corner—" said the doctor and stopped. "No—stop! We must stop him."

"Get out of the way," said Crossley. "Here I go."

"But this is preposterous," screamed Krauss. "Doctor, we must think of something!"

Women sobbed in the streets, their hair trembling in their hands, detached from their heads. Puddles formed wherever women met to weep. See, see, my beautiful hair, fallen! Your hair, you butcher's mate; what of mine? Mine! Yours was hempen rope, a horse's tail! But mine, *ack*, mine! Like wheat in the high wind falling!

Crossley led the doctor and Krauss along a wide street.

"What goes on?" he asked naively.

"Beast, you know well enough," whispered the doctor fiercely. "My wife, my beauteous Thicket, her blonde hair'll be a ruin!"

"Speak roughly to me again," threatened Crossley, "and I'll hurl myself before this next bus."

"Don't, no!" cried Krauss, seizing his arm. To the doctor: "Fool. Is your wife more important than hanging?"

"My wife is as good as your wife," snarled the doctor. "Katrina and her henna rinse!"

Crossley led the way into a building and up in an elevator. They walked on a terrace at the thirteenth floor.

"It is a riot," moaned the doctor, surveying the street below. "The women storm the beauty salons demanding help. I wonder if my Thicket is with them, raging?"

IN HUGE clusters the women of the city held their heads in their hands as if they might topple and fall plunk on the ground. They argued, phoned husbands in high government circles, sent telegrams to the Leader, pummeled and kicked a bald man who laughed at them in their misery.

"Pardon me, Krauss," said Crossley. "There." He flicked a constellation of dandruff from Krauss' lapel.

"My hair," said Krauss, in realization. "My lovely hair!"

"Will you sign peace terms, or shall I jump from this building and let you and your wrathful wife become bald?"

"My wife," sobbed Krauss. "Bald! Ah, heaven!"

"Turn over all secret officers of your plan, admit your guilt in full, and the attack will stop. You will keep your hair," said Crossley. "And cure me of my fatal illness."

"That," said Krauss, "we cannot do. The illness, I mean. But the peace terms, ah, my sweet, balding"

[Turn page]

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wife, the peace terms, I reluctantly accept. Peace, it is."

"Fine," said Crossley. "But, one more term." He grabbed the doctor, held him out over the edge, as if to drop him.

"Stop!" Frantically, the doctor squirmed. "I lied! We did nothing to you. It was psychological. You'd have worried to death in ten years!"

Crossley was so astonished he let go.

He and Krauss stared down at the dwindling doctor, falling.

"I didn't really mean to drop him," said Crossley.

"Squish," murmured Krauss, a moment later, looking down.

Crossley pushed his jet-ship home.

"Edith, it's over! The music'll be off in an hour!"

"Darling!" she radioed. "How'd you do it?"

"Simple. They thought it enough to irritate people. That was their error. They didn't strike psychologically deep enough. Their type of irritant only touched surfaces, made people mad—"

"And sleepy."

"But we attacked their ego, which was something else. People can stand radios, confetti, gum and mosquitoes, but they won't take baldness or turning yellow. It was unthinkable!"

Edith ran to meet him as he landed. The radio still hung in the garden, drifting, singing.

"What do you make it, now?" he cried.

She kissed him.

Pulling back she counted swiftly inside her head, glanced at the floating radio and said, automatically:

"That makes two thousand three hundred and ten!"

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3c A DAY IS ALL YOU PAY

for this outstanding new Family Protection

Wonderful news! This new policy covers everyone from infancy to age 70! When sickness or accident sends you or a member of your family to the hospital—this policy PAYS \$100.00 PER WEEK for a day, a month, even a year . . . just as long as you stay in the hospital. What a wonderful feeling to know your savings are protected and you won't have to go into debt. The money is paid DIRECT TO YOU to spend as you wish. This remarkable new Family Hospital Protection costs only 3c a day for each adult 18 to 59 years of age, and for age 60 to 70 only 4 1/2c a day. This policy even covers children up to 18 years of age with cash benefits of \$50.00 a week while in the hospital . . . yet the cost is only 1 1/2c a day for each child! Benefits paid while confined to any nonmedical hospital, except government hospitals, rest homes and clinics, spas or sanatoriums. Pick your own doctor. Naturally this wonderful policy is issued only to individuals and families now in good health, otherwise the cost would be sky high. But once protected, you are covered for about every sickness or accident. Persons covered may return as often as necessary to the hospital within the year.

This is What \$100.00 a Week Can Mean to You When in the Hospital for Sickness or Accident

Money melts away fast when you or a member of your family has to go to the hospital. You have to pay costly hospital board and room . . . doctor's bills and maybe the surgeon's bill too . . . necessary medicines, operating room fees—a thousand and one things you don't count on. What a Godsend this READY CASH BENEFIT WILL BE TO YOU! Here's cash to go a long way toward paying heavy hospital expenses—and the money left over can help pay you for time lost from your job or business. Remember—all cash benefits are paid directly to you.

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